

Talking Signpost Trial . July 2013

Report of Trial and Recommendations for Future Action

The Project as proposed

The concept was that, in the absence of good signposting round the town, volunteers should be provided at Turner's Memorial to direct people to their chosen destination or to suggest places in the town which could be visited. The plan was to recruit volunteer guides who were familiar with the town and would not require training. While this idea would be useful at any time when the town had visitors about, the initial proposal was to run a trial during the Buxton Festival, 5th to 21st July 2013. More details are set out in the project proposal form entitled Festival Guides (initial trial).

Town Team Approval

The project had been discussed during the summer of 2012 but nothing more had been done. With the summer of 2013 fast approaching, Mike Bryant proposed this idea to the Ideas and Vision Group on May 13th. It met with such support that he wrote up the details on a Proposal Form and took it to the Directors Meeting on 15th May when it was signed off with a budget of not more than £250 to cover tabards which could subsequently be reused at other events.

Volunteers

An appeal for volunteers was sent out to all those on the Ideas and Vision Group Mailing List and to members of the Buxton Group who receive information by e-mail. Offers of help trickled in slowly and were fitted into a timetable with two hour shifts from 10.00am till 4.00pm. Sundays seemed less popular and soon almost all the shifts on Monday to Saturday were filled and Sunday was abandoned from the trial. A feature in Pure Buxton brought the last few volunteers for the trial and a few late comers who have been offered a role in any future scheme. In the end 21 volunteers covered 41 shifts (we did not try to cover the Carnival afternoon). Those volunteers who were available were provided with a short briefing and a chance to meet each other on Wednesday, 3rd July, before the start on 5th. There are now two or three spare volunteers to help in the future.

Equipment and Identity

Janet made two tabards in the Town Team colours. The Town Team logo really only works on a white background so the effect was not as eye-catching as it might be. She also made a bag to take leaflets and other information, which was very useful, and two laminated A3 posters to mark our pitch. These indicated the times when we would be there because we did not want people to feel let down if they had read about the project and looked for help, say in the evening.

After a few days two "i" badges with fluorescent coloured backgrounds were made by Margaret Charlton to wear on the tabards. These did help to offset the idea that we might be doing a survey of some sort.

The Tourist Information Centre agreed to hold the equipment overnight, which provided the opportunity to stock up on leaflets etc first thing each morning.

Choice of site

After the briefing meeting Janet, Tina and Mike went to the Turner's Memorial area to select a pitch. We found the area cluttered and thought it might be better to be based on the Cavendish Arcade frontage. This, we thought, would give the opportunity to shelter from the rain under the end of The Colonnade. This spot soon proved to be unsatisfactory both because fewer people passed close by and because blazing sun displaced the expected rain.

Operations were soon transferred to close to the town map board which attracted visitors who needed help. The posters were transferred from the original lamp post to a wooden post supported by the map board frame. Everyone was much happier with that site and subsequent feedback has confirmed that, if we can only provide the service from one site, this would be the best choice.

The Operation

The volunteers performed excellently. They followed the instructions and relieved each other promptly. It all ran smoothly throughout. Mike was delighted with this because he was really too busy to troubleshoot but he was never called upon to do so.

The scheme was welcomed by both the visitors and local people, many of whom stopped to say "What a good idea".

The questions were many and various. Many could be answered from the knowledge of the volunteers who found much of the provided information was not required. Many people were directed to the Opera House, The Fringe Desk or the Tourist Information Centre. There is no doubt that a Tourist Information Centre would be valuable in this central spot if that was possible. The most valuable item, when helping enquirers was a supply of town maps. Pads of maps were used initially and subsequently, when it became available, the town guide replaced it.

Information Gathered

We had 639 logged contacts (individuals or groups whose questions were answered). Allowing for the parts of the log which are incomplete because the volunteer was too busy to record what she/he was doing, we can project that we actually had over 700 contacts. This means that we influenced the visits of some 1400 persons (because bigger groups offset individuals and many were couples).

The log also captured other data. We know, for instance, where about 1/5th of the visitors came from. Details of this are set out in Appendix 1. When visitors made comments these were also logged but not included in the contacts above. A summary of these comments are listed in Appendix 2.

One thing which soon became clear was that most of those who sought information were not in Buxton to go to the Festival but had come to visit the Town. Several had been dropped by coach without any preparatory research and just asked "What should we see". The implication of this is that the service is needed at any time and is not more necessary during the Festivals. Festival goers tend to just go from one festival venue to another and back to their hotel/guest house.

Feedback has been requested through a questionnaire sent out to all the volunteers and many of these are still to be returned. For the time being, the suggestions entered in the log by volunteers are set out in Appendix 3. An analysis of the Questionnaires will be made available later as Appendix 4.

Summary

The volunteers enjoyed this exercise which also proved popular with the users. It was simple to arrange and operated without intervention except to move the site across the road. Almost all the volunteers are prepared to do it again and several have others in mind who might help in the future. The decision will be made at the Ideas and Vision Group as to how we should carry this forward. Mike would like to put this in the hands of a Project Team to release him from responsibility.

Thanks

This project could not have been undertaken without the enthusiastic participation of the 21 volunteers. The Town Team is grateful for all this hard work and hopes that a Talking Signpost service can be provided whenever it is deemed necessary in future.

Mike Bryant

25th July 2013

www.buxtownteam.org