

1. Overview

For many parts of North Devon the 2016 tourist season was strong, not only mid summer but also continuing into the autumn. Reasons for this in part related to the weather but also unforeseen issues of Middle East turbulence and a referendum vote and falling pound. It would be simple to conclude that prospects for 2107 and beyond are bright. Tourism is a volatile industry, quick to react to changing circumstances. People's willingness to spend can vary as can choice of destination. Come to North Devon in 2016? Maybe it will be Cornwall or Wales in 2017? The experience and the price have to be right. The central question is: 'Is North Devon well placed to deliver?' There are world class beaches, water sports that entice, coast walking possibilities the finest in England and a range of facilities that appeal. Maybe however some things are more marginal. Are facilities adequate and acceptably priced? Is there enough to do if the weather is uncooperative? Can the road system cope effectively? Are the car parks adequate? To what extent is public transport or cycling a viable option?

Devon County Council is a major player in influencing the local economy. A splendid job is done: roads are well repaired, footpaths are excellent, public transport and facilities are supported. It is important to consider the wider picture – maybe there is more scope. Even though it is under severe pressure, it is the County Council that is in the best position to monitor the situation and perhaps secure further funding from central government or Europe.

2. Detail on issues and possible strategies

Identified here are problems evident in 2016 in the coastal zone and a range of suggestions from tweaks to fanciful.

A. Information

A major problem in peak season is road congestion, much of which can be avoided by people showing flexibility of time and place. Some suggestions for hard infrastructure improvements are made below but many delays occur because people don't realise they are heading into a jam. They choose the same time to reach, or leave, accommodation or to head to, or leave, the beach. Fifteen minutes can be the difference between a clear run and a half hour delay. On wet days people get in the car for a drive, often to shop at Barnstaple. Maybe visitors in Ilfracombe choose a drive to Croyde; those in Croyde choose a day in Ilfracombe! Locals and regular visitors realise this and adapt but many unwittingly join the herd. Information could be spread better, perhaps via Devon CC website, and through local and accommodation details. Smart roadside information could indicate existing delays and suggest potential ones. Besides temporal congestion, information could draw attention to spatial problems – avoid Braunton or parking near Woolacombe beach at peak times for example. Information could draw attention to the attractions of other modes. Use the bus instead? Cycle from the train?

B. Walking and cycling

An effective way to address road congestion is to encourage walking and cycling: people are not in a box filling up the road. Moreover they can really enjoy the North Devon experience, feeling fitter and better, breathing quality sea air! For walkers, the coastal network of paths offers immense scope and memorable views. Gaps are few but in some places it is necessary to walk on roads that may be busy with holiday traffic.

Some that spring to mind are: Woolacombe alongside Station Road; between Georgeham and Putsborough; the short stretches at Saunton and Downend where the Coast Path is on the road.

For cyclists, the Tarka Trail is a wonderful facility that brings much to the local economy. Beyond this, the bridleway distribution in North Devon is patchy. It would make sense to consider the possibility of adding cyclists to a few selected suitable public footpaths, especially near settlements. Examples could be from Croyde towards the beach or west of Braunton. Cyclists on much National Trust land have come off second best – NT could contemplate some new routes. Much more important would be properly built joint walking and cycling paths. This network should be extended and would pay back handsomely. Linking Braunton and Ilfracombe on the Tarka Trail is welcome but the route that users would really benefit from would be by the coast. A cycle path from Braunton to Saunton and Croyde would continue via Combas Lane to Putsborough where the Marine Drive already links Woolacombe. This would offer spectacular traffic free cycling and a good choice of routes and be a huge attraction. Another path that would be very helpful would run alongside Mortehoe Station Road. This would join Mortehoe properly to the Tarka Trail and benefit the many pedestrians and cyclists from the large campsites who currently get a raw deal on a busy narrow road.

C. Public transport

Buses. In widening the menu of travel choice and in easing road congestion buses are well placed to contribute. Most of North Devon is well connected, particularly the Westward Ho!, Bideford, Barnstaple (station included), Braunton, Ilfracombe/Croyde route. Woolacombe and Combe Martin fare less well. At Woolacombe the Gold Coast bus is a useful integration. What about a summer service (much greater than school holiday) between Woolacombe, Ilfracombe and Combe Martin? The route could include an interchange at Mullacott Cross, with buses timed to connect with the half hourly Barnstaple service (hourly on Sunday). Substantial and reasonably priced parking could be available and a playpark or activities. Westward, an out and back loop would cater for the large campsites at Warcombe and Damage Barton. Mortehoe could continue to be served by the existing service. In inclement weather such a route could be of special value as it would connect where many stay with facilities to visit, such as in Ilfracombe or at Watermouth Castle. One visitor suggestion was for a shuttle bus connecting the beaches similar to those often found in skiing areas. This could mean a minibus (?), surfboard friendly, running Braunton to Saunton to Croyde to Putsborough to Croyde to Putsborough to Croyde to Saunton to Braunton, hourly at peaks. The Woolacombe to Ilfracombe service mentioned above could operate in a similar way. Bideford and Appledore already have a regular service.

It is not just the bus services that could be changed. To ease their operation and improve timing, roads could include increased bus priority, more bus lanes, signal alterations, more bus bays. For the customer, the buses could take surfboards and possibly bicycles (in a rack on the front?).

Trains. At a time of increased popularity of rail travel, the loss of much of North Devon's network in 1970s puts it at a disadvantage. The Tarka Line from Exeter is underwhelming and often lacks capacity. It should be an attractive option to get to the area by train but the reality is often a struggle. A substantial ongoing journey is inevitable and can be fraught with traffic delays. At least the connection with buses has improved. Improvements to the rail service would be a win-win. There is a latent demand for cycle holidays using the train but for North Devon there is barely enough room for a person let alone a bike. When the franchises for travel to the south west come up for renewal it is vital that cycle carriage features in the mix.

In Slovakia, at the foot of the Tatra, an electric railway joins the resorts. It carries locals, visitors, luggage, skis, snowboards and bicycles. No need for a car! Imagine a light railway from Barnstaple to Braunton to Croyde to Woolacombe to Ilfracombe. Another to Bideford and Westward Ho!

D. Road network and parking

For many, this may seem the starting point for consideration but in this paper the focus is on ways to reduce demand on the network. However there are clear and unavoidable issues and problems that should be tackled. Here, four are selected for comment.

Congestion in Braunton. Most of the traffic heading for Ilfracombe, Woolacombe and Croyde from Barnstaple and the Link Road (in other words most visitors) passes through Braunton where signals and turning traffic cause delays. Change days of Friday and Saturday are particularly difficult. Research and modifications to the signals in the centre have brought improvements. The signals cope well and there is a hefty throughput at the junction as traffic increases. It then seems to reach a point where it ceases to cope and traffic stands still. What factors aggravate the situation and are tweaks possible? Longer pulses in each direction shift greater volumes of traffic and this already seems the approach. Heaviest flows are either towards the coast (one main road) or inland (two roads that converge with delays likely). If a major tailback occurs on one of the roads a turbo boost could kick in, continuing the green with a 'flushing' phase whilst other roads and pedestrian crossings are kept red. Not so simple of course. Pedestrians have to cross but friction is also caused by delivering vehicles (enforce no stopping at peak times?) and turning traffic (discourage?). At the main signals a small amount of traffic requires a right turn across the flow (Ilfracombe to Caen Street). Could some more width and paint ease waiting centre road? The box junctions at the start of Exeter Road have drawbacks. When it is busy, motorists reach these via side roads and then cut back into the flow, so that main road traffic barely moves forward and buses find it impossible to keep to time. Removing box junctions would bring main road traffic nearer the signals and discourage rat running. Right turns into South Street and Heanton Street could be banned – alternatives exist. If more than tweaks are on the agenda, how about using what was originally railway land? Velator Way as the A361? Caen Street pedestrian priority and school with better quality air?

Woolacombe. Delays in Woolacombe occur as car park queueing catches other traffic. Demand for beach parking can exceed supply. In theory it should be a case of monitoring build up and triggering redirection to alternative sites. Hopefully things have been learnt from 2016 and strategies devised. I have not studied parking flows in Woolacombe but will hazard an idea. The main beach car park could be accessed via a slip road coming off a Red Barn roundabout. This would simplify and clear the main junction and people could see the queue and choose to go on to Marine Drive. Smart advance information about capacities would help.

The Link Road. The arrival route for the vast majority of visitors does not excite and is aggravated by the fact it comes at the end of a long journey with often a further whammy such as Braunton to contend with. Often visitors are put off the idea of return visits – fortunately sea air and the beach may mellow these views. Consultation on Link Road improvements has continued and action is anticipated. Over the years the traffic on this route has grown massively: improvement needed! Stretches of extra overtaking lanes between South Molton and Barnstaple and suggested junction modifications will help. Parts of the Link Road are environmentally sensitive, in other places are viaducts or constrictions, but the land take for much of it was generous. Thus there is scope to go from two to three lanes or often better to go from three to four. Often it is not possible to overtake westbound between Stoodleigh junction and Ash Mill, hence serious accidents occur. Junctions can add danger or delay and the proper answer is grade separation. The Knowstone junction is busy and fraught with uncertainties yet there is a lot of land available. Build a bridge and dual a stretch of the Link Road – nearly 3 miles is possible mostly by going from three to four lanes. Later, do something similar at Rackenford (made into one junction).

Car parking. A key question is whether there is a need for more parking and if so, where? Probably there is sufficient and it is a case of getting cars there more effectively at peak times. Many points have already been covered. Cost is important, probably the most common comment by visitors. North Devon is often on the high side (compare Cornwall), particularly for individuals or couples or beach short stayers. When parking by machine, visitors often have insufficient change and in places can't pay by card – no phone signal!

E. Towns, villages and facilities

North Devon offers some special villages for visitors to explore. In 1870 Lynmouth, Clovelly and Croyde were on people's wish lists and it is still true today. Berrynarbor, Mortehoe, Georgeham and many other villages can also be enjoyed. Recent work to remove lines by Western Power needs to be applauded. One less fortunate aspect in the villages is the impact of second homes. This is complicated and largely the result of wider economic forces. The railway came in 1874 and since then coast villages have contained many second homes. Indeed without them settlements would have been poorer and smaller. What is different in 21st Century is that it is now often a business – making money for individuals rather than helping the local community as houses are empty much of the year. Property is bought for speculation, an asset that will increase even if the house is barely used. The holiday let companies are there to assist and are in competition. Villages are defaced by letting displays which gives a poor message. I live in an old house in a village and in a community: I do not live in a holiday park! Strict controls and enforcement could improve things visually. In 2004, St Mary's Road, Croyde was a true community – almost all the 24 houses along my side of the road were lived in. By 2016 I was the only one left - a story no doubt replicated elsewhere. The encouraging thing is that the last few months have seen four more become fully lived in. Changing economics and the ability to work from home are helping to build communities in North Devon's villages.

The larger settlements all have their points of interest and attractions. However parts may be less than inspiring, maybe with a potential that is not realised. The River Taw is macro tidal, the Exe has weirs; nevertheless it can be hard to believe that Barnstaple Quay and Exeter Quay are in the same county. Barnstaple could use its waterfront better. A bar (and foot/cycle bridge) across the Taw by the Quay could hold back high tide water for a large boating lake between April and September. Large boats could still reach the Yeo and part of the Quay. Turbines in the barrier could generate winter electricity and uphold North Devon's credentials for renewable energy. For the future the Taw flood barrier would be part built. Cafes and pubs in the Strand could be joined by shops, crafts and workshops. A restored ship and memorabilia could reflect Barnstaple's history as the main north coast port west of Bristol, complementing excellent Fremington Quay. Other places to consider investment could be Ilfracombe High Street (and more breakwater?) and parts of Westward Ho!

For facilities, pubs and cafes are the cutting edge and are generally appreciated. Maybe not all tastes are well catered for and where can drinks be enjoyed watching the sun setting over the sea? North Devon's range of shops would seem sufficient, covering the basics with a good sprinkle of special local interest. Phone network coverage and wi fi are improving but there is more to do. Many other facilities enhance the neighbourhoods of North Devon and should continue: the North Devon hospital (critically important), libraries, playparks, recreation spaces and so on.

One particular facility is important and currently seems to be at the wrong end of decisions. North Devon Council is closing or trying to off load toilets. Visitors deserve better – North Devon hopes to attract people but then add difficulties. Charging, as has recently appeared in South Devon towns, is wrong. Coming from the beach or water, who has the right coins and the urgent need is often by children or elderly.

3. Conclusions

North Devon has much to offer and most visitors can find inspiration. The main attractions are in a sense timeless – the beaches, the cliffs, the sea and the farmed landscapes. Clearly it is vital that these are not undermined by tacky development but they do not exist in isolation. Facilities enable visitors to come and enjoy the area but here there are questions such as which ones, what capacity, at what cost? The cost of accommodation is probably the most important factor. Does it effectively match demand, peak, mid and low season? Without extensive information this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. Is North Devon up to speed with modern tastes and expectations or, if not, is that part of the charm? Many people like to return

to North Devon time and time again. Their view is “Keep is as it is!” Surely it is possible to do this and increase the scope for enjoyment in North Devon. The functionality of the infrastructure is crucial, in particular around the primary focus of the big beaches of Woolacombe and Croyde. Two core suggestions of this paper centre on alternatives to the car: (a) the importance of a proper cycle route between Braunton and Croyde and (b) a better bus service for Woolacombe. Funding for these would be significant, not exorbitant, and would have a big pay back.

Seasonality is an important issue. A visitor season that spreads helps obviate peak congestion and be more beneficial for local enterprises. Spreading demand during the day is also desirable. Perhaps a combination of information and pricing could work as incentives. North Devon is fortunate in that many activities such as walking or surfing can be rewarding at any time of year and the weather is rarely severe. It is well blessed! In many parts of the world the tourist season can be as short as one month or at most two.

It is not possible to know the future but there are advantages in appreciating a situation and in being prepared. Where will be the flavour of the month in 2017 and beyond? How many of the newcomers of 2016 will return to explore more of North Devon? If visitor numbers rise can all parts of North Devon cope effectively? How can spread away from hot spots be encouraged? Are there, or could there be, negatives in the area acting as a brake on tourism? Are there enough wet weather alternatives? Hopefully this paper approaches such issues and offers appropriately focussed suggestions, promoting discussion.

4. Evidence and background

Mike Harrison makes maps for walking and cycling (Croydecycle maps) working from his house in Croyde. This means visiting much of North Devon and studying it on foot with a mapper’s eye, noticing things, and also returning regularly for deliveries or updating maps. Almost all the Devon coastal zone is covered by 24 maps – this is where most visitors are. Tourist Information Centres across the county sell them as they promote the area and are a good source of revenue. Many are also sold in local shops, post offices and campsites. Evidence thus comes in two forms: firstly, anecdotal from frequent discussions at these outlets or doing research and secondly, using map sales as a barometer of visitor numbers.

2016 was unusual. The spring and early summer were quiet, in some places very quiet. The weather at times was cold and maybe visitors were holding back for later. In June: “We seem to have only the Germans and Dutch”. In summer many places were packed and this continued in September and October like never before. In September: “Everywhere is fully booked”. The biggest attractors were the main sandy beaches with Woolacombe out in front, helped by magnificent publicity, ‘Best beach in Britain’ and so on. In general, map sales for each title will drop from year to year. Many visitors are returners who already have the map and some outlets drop from the list. The 2016 totals surprised: Woolacombe/Mortehoe, already the biggest seller, was up 12%. Neighbouring maps Croyde and Ilfracombe were also well up. Some big sellers were down, for example Lynton/Lynmouth, probably a result of the slow spring or over ordering the previous year. Interestingly, South Devon and East Devon titles were mostly level or down showing that North Devon did get something right! One further piece of evidence is particularly pleasing. The footfall on paths near the coast has increased dramatically and is shown by their condition with prints and earth rather than vegetation under foot, even in quiet mid winter.

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Mike Harrison 15/02/17