

Porthtowan Village Centre Audit Report

December 2016

1. Introduction

As part of the ongoing work of the Porthtowan Beach Management Group (PBMG), it was requested that I undertake a town-centre management audit of Porthtowan. The aim was to identify issues of concern and focus future PBMG work. This style of audit is based on the work I did as a Town Centre Management Specialist with Cornwall Council. Whilst Porthtowan is clearly not of the scale of a town centre, the principles of the audit are very much the same. Any destination - be it a large town or a small village, needs to provide a quality product, a good user experience and have a clear identity within the market place. The audit, therefore, looks at a number of core aspects; public realm, the business offer, the user experience, marketing/branding consistency, as well as suggesting some areas of future support and focus for the PBMG.

2. Overview

Porthtowan is situated on the north coast of Cornwall, approximately 2km west of St Agnes and 4km north of Redruth. The village is situated in the Godrevy Head to St Agnes Heritage Coast, and is within walking distance of National Trust cliff walks. The area is a popular tourism destination, especially for surfing, and is recognised as a high quality bathing/beach environment, having been awarded the prestigious Blue Flag in 2015 and 2016.

The village is effectively a valley towards the sea, with high cliffs on both sides of the beach and hills behind. The majority of residential dwellings are at the top of the village on the higher ground, but continue throughout along Beach Road. There is a mixture of old and new residential throughout.

At the beach front, there is a mixture of micro businesses and SMEs, including food/beverage, service industry and local convenience store along Beach Road. There are two central pay and display car parks, plus free parking adjacent to the beach. There is a good sized public toilet block in the main car park but its operation is seasonal/limited hours.

There is a good sized, and well used, Village Hall with dedicated parking, and this provides good venue for a number of community events. At the back end of the dunes there is an excellent children's play area, recently renovated and is very well used. It provides a good addition to the family tourism market, as well as a good amenity for the local residents.

Porthtowan has a very active Surf Life Saving Club (SLSC) which has a clubhouse and store located directly on the beach. The club membership is over 200, of which 160 are juniors. The Club has a long history of competition, and

regularly competes in the season with other clubs. The SLSC also operates a pilot programme with the RNLI whereby it trains its members to become fully qualified RNLI Lifeguards for the local area. The clubhouse has been badly affected by the elements over the years and is in need of replacement.

Adjacent to the SLSC clubhouse is a South West Water pumping station. Whilst a vital function, it is a little unsightly and the building is in need of repair (render coming off the wall).

A river runs through the valley to the sea and there are bridge crossings at a couple of points along the route to the beach. These are in reasonable state of repair after recent renovation works.

The Dunes were badly damaged in the storms of 2012, and the PBMG is working towards a sustainable planting programme to help the dunes to re-bind and grow.

3. Community Network Area Data - (highlights the demographic of the area within which Porthtowan is situated)

- 17.4% of the local population are aged between 0-15yrs
- 58.7% are aged between 16-65yrs old
- 23.9% of population aged over 65
- 19.1% with no formal qualifications
- 18.9% in likely fuel poverty
- Index of Multiple Deprivation – 20.2%

4. Business Breakdown

Type	No.	Notes
SME Retail	2	
SME Food	3	
National	1	Premier
Licensed Premise	2	
Service	3	2 Hair Salons and a Post Office – the latter is centred within the Premier Shop.
Closed/Vacant	4	Three of these were closed as opposed to vacant. One was vacant but looked like it was being renovated/refitted.

The breakdown of businesses reflects the fact that Porthtowan is a coastal tourism destination. It is typical of many beach locations in terms of its business offer. The majority of premises were food and beverage (when the 4 closed premises are taken into account) and the retail offer focusses strongly on surfing, tourism and souvenir sales. There is a Premier shop offering grocery retail and a post office is located within this, too, both providing good service to the local and tourist population.

There are two large Bars/Pubs, (Blue and The Unicorn) located approximately 200 yards apart. Each has a distinct brand and offer. Blue is located directly on the beachfront, whereas the Unicorn is slightly further up Beach Road, adjacent to the top end of the dunes.

Apart from the licenced premises, there is little year-round business offer.

The business premises which were closed did not have signage saying if it was temporary, or if it was just during the weekdays, or otherwise.

Footfall was low, as expected in the winter months, with only 32 people counted in an hour.

In terms of foot-flow (where people walk as opposed to how many) the majority parked in the main car park and turned right towards the beach or the cliffs. Therefore passing by the cluster of businesses nearest the beach (interestingly where most of the closed businesses were located). Those at the top end of Beach Road, nearest the Premier shop, had hardly any foot-flow at all. However, it was noted that most users of the Premier tended to drive there, park outside (or in the free spaces opposite) undertake their shopping and leave again. It is suggested that these customers were most likely locals dropping by for convenience shopping/post office services. Those driving to the main car park and walking the beach/cliffs were more likely from slightly further afield. If more resource was available, it would be useful to undertake a small questionnaire to find out how far people had travelled to be there. It was noted that most of those present were dog walkers.

5. Public realm review

Overall, the area looked tired and grey. This is partly due to being subjected to the elements. However, there were a number of small items which added to the tired look. Numerous posts and signs are covered in stickers. This is an immediate first impression as the visitor leaves Rose Hill and turns into Beach Road – the first sign has eight stickers on it. As you travel down Beach Road, you pass numerous road signs also with stickers. It is not a cared for or positive first impression.

Notice boards are uncared for and empty. The St Agnes Parish Council notice board outside the Village Hall has one poster in it (which is fixed at an angle) and the rest of the notice board is empty. It looks neglected. The edge of the sign needs painting also.

Some of the fence posts around the dune planting area nearest the Surf Life Saving Club (where the blue rope is) have fallen over, and the blue rope is lying on the sand. Not only does it look untidy but it compromises what the fencing is there to do. There are larger fence posts holding up the wire fencing around the front of the dunes – in a number of cases, their concrete foundations have been exposed as sand has blown back. This not only presents a trip hazard but is also unsightly.

Seating is in need of painting. There is good provision of bench seating throughout (both by the main car park, by the Village Hall, and on the cliffs). However, due to the elements, these were in various states of attractiveness. Whilst none were considered broken, most could benefit from painting. Consideration might be given to painting benches in bright colour schemes to add some vibrancy. (It is appreciated some of the benches are memorial benches and this would not be appropriate in those cases).

Despite the area looking tired, it is positive to note that there was hardly any litter on the road, the beach or throughout the public realm.

The table below details public realm issues requiring attention:

Area	Defect	Notes
Porthtowan sign at Beach Road/Rose Hill junction	Has 8 stickers on it.	Clean sign
Reduce Speed sign at top of Beach Road	Has stickers on it	Clean sign
Lampposts and signage poles throughout	Covered in stickers and/or posters	Audit these and remove stickers/posters
Benches by Village Hall	Weathered	Need painting
Benches by main car park	Weathered	Need painting
Large tarmac area by benches next to Main Car Park	Large grey open space. Not a good welcome point next to the car park.	Look to have seasonal planters installed to brighten it up.
Bus Shelter opposite Village Hall	Dirty, and covered in posters	Community clean project
Telephone Box opposite Village Hall	Dirty	Community Clean project
St Agnes Parish Council Notice Board by Village Hall	Uncared for, only one piece of paper pinned up in it, frame needs painting	Install coloured background to any empty space is at least colourful and not grey. Duplicate the map in the main car

		park as a printed version in the notice board. Paint the notice board.
Info Map by Village Hall	Faded and of different brand and house style to the big map in the main car park	Get copy of the main sign in the car park printed to ensure consistency of design /brand and message.
Wooden information table/stand at top of dunes	Empty	Needs information putting into it.
Wooden information table/stand by Surf Life Saving Club	Empty and piece of wood missing	Needs information putting into it and repairing.
Surf Life Saving Club	Old Car seat and rags let outside the club (on the seaward side and in full view) Building tired and in need of painting	General tidy up of site.
SWW Pumping Station	Render coming off the wall (on the seaward side)	Report and repair
Access Ramp	Exposed drop (of approx. 1ft) at end of ramp. H&S issue	Investigative works already underway to resolve this.
Pay and Display machine in main council car park	Weathered and in need of painting. Poor first impression	Paint and clean.

6. Strengths / Weaknesses

Strength	Weakness
Superb coastal location	Exposure to the elements means a need for greater emphasis on maintaining the public realm
Public toilet provision	Seasonal / limited opening only
Central car parking	Differences in pricing between council owned/private owned car parks. Plus free parking at beach. No consistency in offer.
Seasonal' No Parking Zone' to support access to the beach	Causes parking (and bus turning) issues in winter months when seasonal period ends. Need to review the parking order timings.
Small but good offering of food/beverage businesses and tourism retail.	Heavily focussed on tourism market and limited offer out of season.
Access Ramp to the beach	Still limited access and ramp not

	finished correctly.
New planting to support re-growth of the dunes	Many of the posts/ropes neglected and in need of improving. Foundations exposed.
Signage in some areas explaining the planting programme	Two of the information tables are empty.
2 minute litter pick - excellent	Only at one entrance to the beach
Recycling bins in main car park.	Access in the summer.
Blue Flag status	Resource issue to maintain this
Lifeguarded in main visitor season	Not lifeguarded out of season.
Good information map signage in main car park	No consistency with similar maps/signage in other areas.

7. Marketing

There is no single brand / house style for the marketing of Porthtowan. Instead, it is a collection of websites, a couple with a strong 'lifestyle' feel to them, but mostly generic Cornwall tourism sites. This is fairly typical of most small coastal areas with different businesses and organisations all promoting elements of the same product, with a similar focus, but without a coordinated effort.

The top listing for the google search 'Porthtowan' is www.visitcornwall.com This is part of the wider Cornwall promotional activity. The Porthtowan landing page on this website, however, lists restaurants and bars in St Agnes and beyond as places to eat and visit, and does not cover any of the food outlets within Porthtowan. This may be because Visit Cornwall is a membership organisation, but given it is the top listing for a potential visitor that does not know the area, the absence of business listings/things to do is something which might be worth considering.

The Visit Cornwall website does, however, take you through to www.porthtowanbeach.com and this is the website operated by the Porthtowan Beach Association. This has a clear lifestyle feel about it and is easy to navigate. It is possible that the PBA is a member of Visit Cornwall on behalf of the Porthtowan business community. If it isn't, it is recommended the PBA might wish to work more closely with Visit Cornwall on the destination marketing of Porthtowan. This website does have good listings of businesses, things to do, the work of the community in Porthtowan, and links to respective websites. Under its own optimisation, however, the www.porthtowanbeach.com is listed 9th on Google. Whilst it is positive that this is sits on the first Google page (10 listings per page), some optimisation work to get the website listed higher would be beneficial.

The second web listing is www.cornwalls.co.uk which again is a generic Cornwall tourism listing.

The third listing is www.blue-bar.co.uk and this is the highest listed Porthtowan-generated site. This site has a clear brand and style which (naturally) covers food/beverage as well as an active lifestyle /surf style to it. It is easy to navigate and promotes a strong product.

The other sites on the top listings featured more about the origins of Porthtowan rather than destination marketing.

There was no evidence of Porthtowan literature/guides/maps in outlets within 5/10 miles radius. It is not known if there is a promotional leaflet to accompany any online marketing.

There has been mixed public relations coverage for Porthtowan in the past, which may resonate more with local residents than it would visitors further afield. Recently, there has been very positive coverage, however, with the likes of the Blue Flag award, the access ramp, etc. As part of the Porthtowan beach Management Group work, as coordinated PR campaign, with core messages and targeted reach should be considered.

8. Support Options

Public Realm

The public realm is heavily affected by the elements and the area does look tired and grey. Possible improvements could include:

- Remove stickers from all signs
- Paint benches (possibly in brighter colours to add some vibrancy)
- Wide tarmac area outside the main car park (on the corner of Sandy Road) is vast empty space. Some partnership work with CORMAC/Dunes Community Group/Garden Centres, etc to install planters and hardy plants to lift the area.
- Ensure all signage boards are up to date (have something in them) and are clean and maintained.
- Improve the St Agnes Parish Council Notice Board – very dull and only has one piece of paper in it. Install colourful background, so even if it is empty it is not looking neglected.
- Look to get consistency of style/design for all maps on display – the large map sign in the main car park contrasts drastically with the tired and faded map outside the Village Hall.
- Cornwall Council to paint the pay and display machine/standing area in the main car park.
- SWW to repair their pumping station wall (fix the render)
- SLSC to tidy up outside their clubhouse.
- Posts/ropes which have fallen over in the planting area need to be re-installed.
- Posts with foundations showing need to be repaired.

It is recommended that a pre-season audit is undertaken to give the area a spring clean ready for the main season. However, focus should still be given to the winter months, especially if attempts are being made to broaden the season. The audit should be undertaken in early late Feb/early March to give enough time to rectify faults for the first main holiday period (depending on the fall of the Easter Holidays).

Through the main season (May to Sept) a monthly audit should be undertaken to maintain standards and address issues at the earliest opportunity.

PR campaign

Consideration should be given to a coordinated PR Campaign as well as destination marketing. There are many positive stories and messages for Porthtowan and these should not be hidden away. Considering what the core messages you want and how to reach targeted audiences would help. Consideration should be given to running a workshop on this as a sub-group of the Beach Management Group.

Web optimisation/ coordinated campaign

As discussed, above, there is a need to look at web optimisation of the website if this is the main destination site originating from Porthtowan. Additionally, consideration should be given to better links between Porthtowan businesses and the www.porthtowanbeach.com website.

It would be worth talking to businesses and seeking their views about web support, and if they actively have a web presence (they do not show up on Google at present, apart from Blue Bar). Identifying business support packages to help businesses get online and provide greater coverage for them would be useful.

There is potential for businesses to work together to promote some clear and consistent marketing messages/brand which promote Porthtowan per se. This would not preclude businesses still promoting their own brand through their own websites.

User surveys

Customer feedback is essential. Undertaking some visitor questionnaires at different times of the year is vital to identify who is coming, from where, their barriers to staying longer, their barriers to visiting at other times of the year, how they find out about Porthtowan etc. At present there is no known data being

collected. It would also be a chance to collate email addresses and targeted audiences. Aligned to this, consideration might be given to undertaking a similar survey further afield – maybe in Truro, Penzance, or elsewhere, to identify people’s awareness and views of Porthtowan and why they do/do not visit.

Continued grant funding

For the Porthtowan beach Management Group to continue long term, it is essential grant funding is attained. The group is already a Coastal Community Team in receipt of a small £10K grant which is earmarked for certain projects. It has been recognised that there is a need for a new SLSC clubhouse which could service as a community facility and enhance the usage of Porthtowan. Equally, sustained planting and support for the renovations of the dunes is also going to require funding. Further still, any survey work, marketing/PR support etc can be enhanced if grant funding can be secured. It is recommended that a sub-group of the Beach Management Group be set up to look at funding applications and to be able to apply for opportunities in a timely manner.

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