

Working together to move forwards” - Jonathan Welch

In mid-January, VisitBritain joined with the Coach Tourism Association to hold a webinar looking at the road to recovery for Britain's coach sector. Jonathan Welch provides a brief summary of the discussion

Some quarters of Britain's struggling coach industry have reported a surge in bookings recently from people showing optimism or taking advantage of generous cancellation T&Cs choosing to book 'staycations' in the UK. As the industry tries to gather itself together and make the best of summer 2021, VisitBritain organised an online conference on 14 January where coach operators could speak to the wider tourism sector, and where the message was very much a positive one. Hosted by VisitBritain's Tourism Education Development Manager Scott Grime, panellists were Robert Shaw, Coach Tourism Association Chair and Director of Harry Shaw; Lucy Osborne, UK Product Manager at Leger/Shearings; John Johnson, Commercial Director of Johnsons Coaches; and Paul Cartwright, Director of A&P Travel.

CTA

Robert Shaw started off the session by thanking VisitBritain for showing an interest in the sector. Robert chose a positive and motivational approach to open with: "I'm going to start with a few quotes," he began, starting with Benjamin Franklin's very apt 'out of adversity comes great opportunity'. "There are chances out there to prosper, but we've got to learn to adapt and move with the times. Richard Branson said that business opportunities are like buses, there's always one coming along. It might not seem like that at the moment but I believe that. If we can get over the next few months there is opportunity out there. We've got to learn to adapt."

His second choice was 'the darkest hour is just before dawn.' "We thought things were getting better. It is going to happen though," he said, continuing the positive vibe. "We will get to the stage where clients will have the confidence to travel again. When that's going to be, nobody knows. The vaccine has contributed enormously to customer confidence, but it's going to take a while to recover."

Robert went on to highlight the importance of knowing your own business's survival tactics when it comes to dealing with the unexpected, as no two businesses are the same. "There's no training manual for all this, no YouTube tutorial," he continued. "Businesses need to be mean and lean to survive, and one thing the lockdowns have given us all is time to analyse our businesses. It's also given us the chance to perhaps learn new technologies and skills."

Robert continued by saying that despite the announcement by Baroness Vere that no extra funding for coaches would be forthcoming, that does at least mean the industry has an answer and a basis for moving on. "We've got to dust ourselves down and get on with it. We've survived this far," he said, pointing to the general feeling that we are closer now to the end than the beginning.

In closing, he reminded viewers that the CTA provides a great way for operators and suppliers and partners to connect and help each other and work together across the travel and tourism sector to help get the country moving again.

Johnsons Coaches

Next up was John Johnson of Johnsons of Henley-in-Arden. "It's not been an easy year for the industry at all, but we all need to stay positive," John began. "It's the worst time of our lives in some ways, but it could be worse. Our industry has changed with the times so much over so many years, and this pandemic is no different really. We can make the changes and move forward."

"We were looking forward to a really good year this year, we had lots of bookings for holidays and day trips," he said, showing an image of the three new coaches delivered days before the first lockdown last year. "Not the best timing for a £600,000 investment. Like so many operators, we've committed to 2021. We sent out a list back in July and followed it up with a full brochure in November. We are optimistic about the future," he continued, saying that the company had worked hard to deal with cancellations or people postponing their trips, and that he saw it as a good sign of people's faith and trust that it still held a significant sum of unallocated funds from bookings held over.

'Groups is not a dirty word'

John said that whilst group trips and travel represents a significant proportion of the sector's workload, he had seen some resistance from some attractions which are nervous about groups. "We hope that will dissipate and disappear as we go forwards," he said. "We've got to work together to help each other."

John highlighted that good practise and strong customer relationships are vital to survival. "The crisis has reminded me that brand and culture is so important. We kept in contact with our customers throughout the year. One of our members of staff called every member of our loyalty club – 800 members – to make sure they were OK. Look after your customers, look after your staff, and look after your suppliers too."

John asked whether we could see another 'roaring Twenties' in the same way that the 1918 Spanish Flu was followed by a decade of boom in the 1920s. "Perhaps we can look forward to that. However, it won't be all plain sailing. We've got vaccine passports: will that happen?" he asked, highlighting that even with a vaccine, a passenger could still carry the virus. "And then we think about our drivers and couriers, and hotel and attraction staff – these will often be young and so well down the list for vaccination. The post vaccine situation won't be as clear as we hoped but we will see."

John spoke of the work done over Christmas by his staff, who would normally be engaged in taking around 800 people on trips and holidays. In 2020, 300 had made bookings in the hope of travel returning to normal over Christmas, and whilst those had to be cancelled, Johnsons' staff delivered each one of those 300 people a box of chocolates. "I think it's so important to show that we care."

Gearing up for 'Good to Go'

In the short window in late 2020, a number of tours were operated, John said, and customers were both understanding and appreciative, wanting to get out for a change of scenery, but warned that it comes at a cost: "Social distancing comes at a price, the downside is lower profitability. We could get about 28-30 people on a coach depending on the make up of a group. We had to tailor make the seating plan for every departure, which was a bit of a pain but very worthwhile doing. Customers appreciated it." He also highlighted the work undertaken in writing safe operating procedures and guidelines.

In closing, John told attendees from across the leisure sector that the coach industry will be ready to go whenever it can do so, as will customers. "Hotels, attractions, we really hope that you'll be ready to receive and welcome our guests." He also stressed that as companies such as Johnsons are putting together their plans for trips and tours for the future, it would be a big help if attractions and venues could do their utmost to answer phones. He said Johnsons had found that some attractions were uncontactable, making it difficult to make arrangements, bookings or put brochures together. "Make sure you are ready to take our bookings please. Let's work together to recover together."

Leger Shearings Group

Lucy Osborne of the Leger Shearings Group said it had been a year of negative headlines. "It seems that every day there is another bad news story for us all, and specifically for our industry. We've seen many great businesses struggle and fail." Lucy had worked for Shearings prior to its collapse in 2020. She addressed a number of key areas where Leger has been focussing. "The recovery of confidence is based on three principles: firstly confidence in the business, creating a certain future for stakeholders," she said, highlighting Leger's approach to diversifying the risk. "Then it's about confidence for the customers. How do we get the customers back to book with us? And then there's confidence in the supply chain. Everything from hotels, coaches, we all need to be on the same page about how the industry standard might look and how we are going to navigate the climate together."

Lucy went on to explain how the acquisition of Shearings dovetailed well with Leger's need to diversify into domestic tours at a time when its stock-in-trade of European travel is in the main not possible, as well as saying how well the two fit together with many synergies between the two especially in terms of customer demographics. She also pointed to the different lead times, noting that whereas Leger's European breaks were doing well for later this year and into 2022, the domestic side of the market tends to be much less far ahead, meaning that the Shearings brand is much more 'now-focussed' and responsive to quickly changing situations.

Lucy highlighted the importance of working together across the leisure sector to prioritise partnerships to ensure that all parties can move forward in a way which is sustainable for everyone. A feature looking in more detail at the Leger acquisition of Shearings and the company's plans moving forwards is planned to appear in CBW in a few weeks' time.

A&P Travel

The final speaker was Paul Cartwright, Co-Director of A&P Travel, which operates a fleet of five coaches on a programme of over 80 European holidays and over 250 day trips per year, and undertakes no other work such as schools. The company employs two full time, and two part time drivers alongside Paul and his father, plus three office staff. Having grown up around the family business, Paul has been around coaches all his life, and said that many of the customers he remembered from his childhood are still travelling now, in their 80s and 90s.

"We've spent more time advertising what we're doing to keep people safe than where we're going," he said, talking about the company's personal and friendly approach to service and to its customers. A&P Travel is a relatively new member of the CTA, having joined in early 2020, and Paul said that he had found it very worthwhile and made useful connections.

"We've all been on such a rollercoaster this year. The best thing to come out of it is the support that I and other operators have had between each other." Paul went on to speak about the resilience of the coach industry, mentioning how it has survived the increase in cheap air travel.

"Covid has been the cancer that has attacked the very core of our industry and brought it to its knees. We've been talking to our customers, and they very much want to get out and about as soon as they've had the vaccination and are allowed to go out," he said.

In closing, Paul passionately asked: "I would urge all attractions and destinations to be open, to be welcoming, to be flexible, to be organised, but most of all to be grateful for our trade. I would urge everybody to keep standards up. Our customers deserve proper treatment after what they've gone through this year." He continued with "a polite reminder that we are not the enemy. We are trying to provide support to your destination, your business or your attraction. We provide safe, sanitised travel. We have a perfect system of track and trace where the government's one has failed. All genuine operators are taking this very seriously. Our industry should be seen as the solution to a problem, rather than the cause. If we all work together we can all resume a normal business life sooner rather than later."