

Waterfront Welcome Team - Portsmouth 2021

Background and role

In order to improve the welcome to the seafront area in Southsea, Portsmouth following the lifting of restrictions relating to the Covid 19 pandemic a team was recruited. The Waterfront Welcome Team were funded by the Government's 'Welcome Back Fund' and tasked with walking along the seafront and into Old Portsmouth, engaging with visitors and residents, providing information, and also acting as the council's eyes and ears to report any issues and concerns.

The Welcome Back Fund is supported by the European Regional Development Funding (ERDF).

Waterfront Team Outputs

Six staff were employed working in teams of two - depending on availability this was one or two teams each day from 24 July through to 26 September. On very rainy days the team was employed for part of the day or stood down completely.

In total out of 65 possible days, the team was available, and the service provided, on 60 days.

General Feedback from the Team

The role varied quite a lot depending on the weather, with many more people around and asking for advice on sunny days.

The main questions were directional - with number one being location of toilets.

The second most often asked question related to the history of the area. The team took it upon themselves to learn more in this field to enable them to answer questions.

There were lots of comments about parking - the paying process rather than the price or availability. And about cycles and scooters on the promenade and dogs on the beach.

The interactions were about 50/50 visitor and resident and there was lots of positive feedback to the role from both. On the whole the visitors were really positive and enthusiastic about the area, residents less so.

Lessons learned if we were to repeat

Make the Waterfront Team role more obvious - they were wearing hi-vis and were clearly PCC but a 'happy to help' or similar on the back of the hi-vis would be useful.

Include historical overview training in induction.

Although there is no funding in place to repeat this activity in 2022 we are looking at options with colleagues and destination partners.

Some specific feedback from the team:

I've thoroughly enjoyed this role! It's been really interesting being out & about on the seafront and getting to know how much goes on behind the scenes in making it run smoothly. On our travels, we've interacted with residents, tourists, local business owners, and other people working on the seafront such as security and cleaning staff, lifeguards, as well as museum colleagues and duty managers. This really gives you a more joined-up idea of how it all works, which makes you more able to give good help and advice.

It feels good to be able to offer this kind of "on the ground" customer service, and I feel that we've had some really good contacts with people, they've seemed pleased that there were visible council staff there to ask about things.

I feel we made a valuable contribution to the visitor experience, but with a few tweaks, we could play an even greater role in encouraging people to return.

We had a lot of interesting conversations with visitors and residents. Many people asked for directions, a few wanted to know about bus services and there were several queries about the rules for allowing dogs on the beach. I had some interesting chats with a few families who wanted historical information. Henry VIII is a big draw, particularly for youngsters. One family wanted to know the exact position of the Mary Rose when she sank.

Residents loved coming to us with their little grumbles, but they were always friendly. I had the feeling they just appreciated having someone to talk to and didn't expect us to take immediate action. We just made them feel better by being there and listening. However, we fed everything back and advised them on approaching the city helpdesk.

We had some good long chats with people who were visiting the seafront on their own. Sometimes people just want someone to talk to and that makes the seafront walking team a valuable resource.

The leaflets and stickers are an excellent idea. It allowed us to approach people without looking like we were hassling them with surveys. It was evident that kids love stickers so it would be good to keep those.

However, there is some room for improvement. I felt people would approach us more if our purpose was obvious. Many people thought we were doing surveys or were there on some other council business. We noticed that people approached us more when we were standing around rather than walking, so a prominent information point from which to walk would be a great idea - if that is possible of course.

I think it would be a good idea to start earlier in the season, to cover the bank holidays, and wind down in September - perhaps just covering weekends at this point.