



ACTAN Case Study
By Maureen Cowbourne

The Association for Care Training and Assessment Networks posed itself the very searching question when it came to the Island last year. The network asked itself: 'Are we as good as we think?' That question is likely to provoke some defensive responses, so it was important it was asked in a harmonious setting and the organisation found just that when it came to the Island in November 2006.

Once a year the national UK organisation, that aims to promote and develop best practice in the use of occupational standards across health, care and education, holds an annual conference somewhere in Britain and the Island 'won hands down' said Maureen Cowbourne, domiciliary care manager with the DHSS who opened the conference.

'When we started to think about having the conference here I rang the DTL (Department of Tourism and Leisure) and asked if there was anything they could do to help. They had a very 'can do' attitude. They were very flexible with the support they gave us. They paid to have the conference co-ordinator come over with his team to inspect the hotels and facilities. Then we presented to the UK committee against other areas and won hands down.

'The Villa Marina clinched the deal...once they saw the facilities we have here on the Island we were the obvious choice. Another benefit is that a lot of my colleagues on the Island were able to attend. If we had to go off island not as many would have been able to attend and therefore benefit.'

This is all music to the ears of the DTL's Isle of Man Visitor and Convention Bureau. The bureau was established by the department and, since 2004, has been actively working to increase the number of conferences and meetings held on the Island.

Conferences inject a significant amount of cash into the Island's economy and also serve as great promotion of various Manx delights. In 1999, there were three conferences held on the Island using 220 bed spaces, that brought in a net economic benefit of £310,000. After the establishment of the conference bureau there have been 34 conferences with 9,155 delegates taking up 25,276 bed nights and injecting £3.6m into the Manx economy.

The bureau's job is to make life easier – in every aspect - for conference organisers, and this was certainly the experience of ACTAN. The bureau provided 'good sound advice' said Maureen, it also organised sightseeing bus trips, a tour of the brewery and made sure ferry travel times co-ordinated with the conference.

'Richard Cuthbert, communications executive for the Isle of Man conference board, was excellent to work with,' said Maureen. 'He had lots of ideas that would never have occurred to me...especially for partners of delegates. I was so focused on making the conference a success, I'd not given extra curricular activities a single thought.

'The DTL paid for bus tours and it was an offer that was certainly taken up. I think just about everyone took part. And the DTL paid for our keynote speakers ...this was essential in making the conference a huge success.

'We stayed at the Hilton and the Claremont. The Hilton was the main venue for the conferences. The staff and management at both hotels really bent over backwards to make our event a success. And the folks at the Villa Marina were fantastic...just mention something and it's done! We had the conference dinner at the Hilton.'

The bureau performed well and so did Maureen. Her actions in flagging up the Island as a possible conference venue, so giving the DTL the chance to persuade the network they should brave the Irish sea and hold the conference here is just what the bureau is encouraging through its ambassador programme. In the programme, on-Island members of national organisations become de facto ambassadors for the Island and charged with persuading their UK counterparts that the Island is the best place to hold a conference. The two-day conference in such a beautiful setting, where everything runs smoothly, put both organisers and attendees in as calm a frame of mind as possible to do some rigorous self-analysis.

Members of ACTAN come from all sectors of the health and social care sector and in its promotion of best practice, the conference covered: evaluation of our training/assessment services; self evaluation; and evaluation of service effectiveness. Workshops included raising standards for children and young people, developing a reflective practice;

encourage self evaluation, evaluating impact of training on individuals.

Despite the searching nature of the conference, the feedback was 'excellent,' said Maureen. 'Everyone thoroughly enjoyed it!' There were a few comments about the building works on the prom and that it suggests a progressive and thriving economy. All the building on Douglas should be completed before long, by which time ACTAN could well be holding another conference here!

'I think it really put the Isle of Man on the map.' said Maureen. 'I am still involved in the national conference committee and people still talk about their trip to the Isle of Man.'
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