

# Designing and Marketing Low Season Tourism Experiences

**Interreg**   
France ( Channel  
Manche ) England  
**EXPERIENCE**  
European Regional Development Fund

Prof. Xavier Font  
Jean-Moussa Lucas  
David Cloarec





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Products are so yesterday, and customers want to engage with your offering with all their senses.

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You will need to create experiences that are great, even when it's cold, wet, and dark early. Co-create experiences with nearby partners and use events to drive demand.

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# 04

## Let's design innovative experiences.



**37%** of domestic visitors  
choose a destination because of the  
experiences it offers

Now that you are familiar with the low season resources available to you, use them to design experiences that have meaning and value to your customers. Resources give you opportunities but, in themselves, they are insufficient particularly in low season when you may not have the latent demand.

It's time to use those resources and to get creative in how you package them as an experience that consumers can recognise and purchase. 37% of domestic visitors choose a destination because of the experiences it offers (VisitEngland, 2019).

You will need to create experiences that are great, even when it's cold, wet and dark. Co-create experiences with nearby partners and use events to drive demand.

Nobody said it would be easy!



# Low season is the time to experiment and learn.

## Use low demand periods as a chance for product development and market.



Customer needs are changing and in high season you do not have the time (nor want the risk) to experiment. So, use your low season to develop products based on the four concepts below that have proven to be highly successful at increasing revenue in our industry:

### **Personalisation.**

You are unique! Customers look for products customised to their needs. Personalise low season when you have more time to cater for fewer customers.

### **Packaging.**

You are hassle-free! Give your customers peace of mind by showing that all their needs are covered. Identify all the customer needs (transport, activities, food and beverages, entertainment, interpretation, accommodation, souvenirs...) and select which of these your target markets will appreciate having you take care of for them and which they can do for themselves more cost-effectively. Only package the elements that add value to the customer.

### **Premiumisation.**

You are special! Emphasise the superior quality and exclusivity of your experiences to make your customers feel special. This also allows you to be less price sensitive.

### **Gamification.**

You are fun! Engage your customers with playful experiences to encourage them to spend more and come back.

### **Co-creation.**

You are social! Customers want to be the protagonists of their experiences not spectators. So, find a way to involve them further and create opportunities for them to share their experiences with others online.

After you have experimented with your off-season offer with a combination of these five ideas, then use your learnings to also improve your summer experiences. Make small changes first, to see how your customers respond and what the additional cost in time or resources is for you. Constantly learn from your experiments and introduce new improvements.

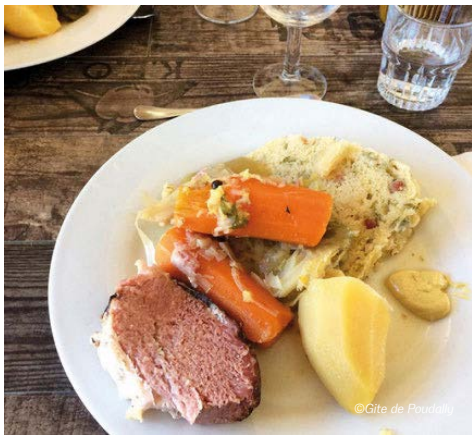
Search for examples of experiences in Airbnb Experiences, TripAdvisor Experiences, Expedia Local Expert and Get Your Guide, locally to you and in a highly popular region in your country. What can you learn from the examples?





# We offer a different experience in the low season.

## Elsa Déléris is the Owner of the holiday cottage gîte de Poudally (FR).



### Our Tips:

Use the low season to revisit classic routes by offering a different perspective. Make sure you craft your experience towards your winter target market. Mix in some sense of adventure, some cultural and gastronomic discoveries, create the right conditions for entertaining interactions and package the whole thing under an intriguing name, and you have a recipe that rarely fails to make an impact!

### What we do:

Winter is an opportunity to offer an experience with a twist. One of our most successful experiences is the “werewolf trail”, an experience we are offering to group and family customers that consists of a moonlit hike (hence the werewolf!) with a gastronomic stopover in a traditional “caselle” (local stone shepherd’s hut), a traditional hearty meal to be shared on our communal table on return to the gîte and the room for the night.

### How we do it:

We located a typical caselle large enough to accommodate 15 people, a few kilometres from the gîte and accessible by an open path that was operable by moonlight. We packaged an experience to fit the

expectations of our winter target markets (hikers and family groups), mixing up the elements of an accessible hike, local gastronomic delights, a departure time that suits young families and an overall experience no longer than 3 hours with both exciting and relaxed times. We depart at around 5.30 pm, walk for 1h-1h30mins in the open air before reaching the caselle where a variety of local delicacies are waiting for the guests: warm drinks to suit all ages, local dried sausage, rocamadour (cheese) and pastis (a traditional cake from the Quercy region).

Back at the gîte, guests arrive to find a warm “miqué” (a kind of local ragout) for our adventurers to share on our communal table. This experience has long been a key appeal for our low-season clientele.



We raise awareness of our resources amongst businesses. Hetty Byrne is the Sustainable Tourism Officer at the Forest of Bowland AONB (UK), who has worked with a local astronomer to promote dark skies tourism.



#### Our Tips:

For situations in which you need a critical mass of activity to create a new product, you need to work in parallel with local supply to raise awareness of the potential available. Launching a new experience in the market requires capturing the attention and imagination of both businesses and customers, and we have found that you are more likely to succeed with this in the low season, when there are fewer alternative markets for the tourism businesses and fewer entertainment options for visitors.

#### What we do:

The Forest of Bowland Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) promotes winter as the best time of year to star gaze, when you can see the Milky Way on moonless nights with the naked eye, since the skies are at their darkest and the stars at their brightest.

#### How we do it:

We offer a series of activities to raise awareness of the potential of dark skies as a tourism resource.

We identify five designated Dark Sky Discovery Sites and engage with about 20 tourism businesses as 'Dark Sky Friendly', which means that they have attended a training workshop run by the AONB and local amateur astronomer, Robert Ince.

In this training the businesses conduct a lighting audit of their premises and put an action plan in place to proactively reduce light pollution. The businesses learn how to provide information about star gazing in the area and receive marketing ideas of how to attract visitors out of the tourist season by promoting the dark skies of the AONB.

To raise awareness amongst visitors, the AONB runs a free of charge Dark Skies Festival week (in February half term) and encourages visitors to stay in the Dark Sky Friendly accommodation. In 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the third annual festival was virtual, with bookable events run via Zoom. Similar experiences can be found at: <https://www.darks skiesnationalparks.org.uk/>.



# Create economies of scale and new experiences.

## Bring in your partners and competitors to maximise your impact and reduce risks.



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When demand is low, the easy option can be to fight for the crumbs. But by pooling your efforts, you might well be able to create a demand that wasn't there in the first place just because the existing offer wasn't sufficient.

**Find a common** need with other businesses in your area. For example, often, the Christmas season is not exploited to its full potential, partly because offers are too limited. If you are a venue or a hotel, your impact on your own is limited despite your best efforts to be creative in your offer. Yet, if different local organisations were to put on an attractive show, the range and scale of your appeal to potential visitors has the potential to be much more effective, with everyone benefitting.

**Coordinate** exchanges between stakeholders (or find the right facilitator

to do so) to find a common approach and put together a finely tuned communication campaign that offers a range of complementary local experiences to your visitors.

**Share data.** First off, data that might be irrelevant to some may be relevant for others. Secondly, the more information that you, and other local stakeholders, can gather on consumer behaviours and expectations, the more easily you can form a cohesive and impactful communication campaign and design better experiences for your visitors.

**Join forces.** Create new experiences by combining complementary products and services, and share the marketing effort and risk.

**A word of caution:** When you combine services with another supplier and you sell them together, you need to check whether your joint service falls under the new European Package Travel Directive (2018), which protects European tourists when two or more of the following services are sold together: transport of passengers; accommodation; car and motor rental; and other travel services, like excursions, guided tours or museum visits. It does not apply to those services that are part of another travel service, such as accessing on-site facilities such as evening entertainment within a hotel. But it may apply to, for example, creating a murder-mystery weekend or allowing third party suppliers to offer services within your own premises, unless they are sold as separate services.





We find synergy with local stakeholders that share the same issues.

Claire Ballossier is the Communications Officer at the departmental tourism development agency Loire-Atlantique Développement (FR).



#### What we do:

We have created a platform to promote our coastal destination, bringing together five seaside resorts to enhance the territory in the low season.

#### How we do it:

The Loire-Atlantique Développement agency (LAD) initiated the first “La Mer en Hiver” campaign in 2018. After approaching the tourism offices representing the main seaside resorts in the department, five responded to take part in the initiative.

Each tourism information office identifies the tourist operators active during the winter season in their destination and a marketing study is carried out by the LAD to group these offers under four key categories: *Thrills* (which includes all outdoor sports), *Wellbeing* (for an attractive indoor offer completely independent of the winter weather), *Nature* (which is much

easier to observe in periods of low attendance), and *Family* (for the fun part and concentrated on shared times).

Each category offers a range of activities with a direct link to the operators. The icing on the cake is that for those looking for a turnkey holiday, rather than individual activities, we have created all-inclusive packages for a complete holiday offer.

Our communication style is based on a vocabulary drawn from the mountains and winter games (slopes, wetsuits, sliding, slalom, etc.) to give a playful tone to an invitation to change habits. We seek out qualitative and attractive visuals for the web page and rotate the photos/videos regularly, using those taken at the same time the previous year to keep them seasonal and relevant. Also, we have created a hashtag, #LaMerEnHiver, with a direct feed that highlights the photos of Instagram users using the hashtag on their photos.



#### Our Tips:

Multi-sector collaboration is key to the success of an ambitious communication campaign. Work with partners to bring the best of their skills to bear, from financing (department and tourism offices), to identifying the activities to be promoted during the winter season (tourism offices), to setting up a powerful communication campaign (local tourism development agency). Don't hesitate to play on the fun aspect to encourage a new look and a better commitment from consumers.





# Tap into people's yearning for a meaningful experience.

## Tailor experiences around wellness, self-discovery and purpose.



Whether it is through wellness, meditation, sport or experiences that will bring people out of their comfort zone, a holiday is the perfect time for people to take the time to look after themselves and some will seek to turn it into a personal journey of self-discovery.

To turn a product or service into an experience, you will need to find a way to make it resonate with your potential customers' needs. Here are five very different options to inspire you.

**The bucket list.** Everyone has their own bucket list with out-of-the-ordinary experiences they want to live at least once in their lives. Do not hesitate to design some “extreme” and/or weird and wonderful experiences that will, at worst, entice the most adventurous customers and, at best, catch the eye of curious potential visitors.

**Reconnecting with nature.** The pursuit of modern life has, paradoxically, created a strong desire for some urbanites to reconnect with nature. The COVID-19 pandemic has supercharged that desire to the extent of reversing the rural exodus. Happily for rural tourism venues, nothing can reflect the diversity and appeal of seasonality better than nature. Let it take the centre stage in your offers.

**Going back to simpler things.** Some of your customers will have a desire to leave behind all noise and hyper connectivity when going

on holiday. Sometimes, creating a meaningful experience can be as simple as creating the right conditions to allow that to happen. Offer no internet zones/sites, replace the microwave with a fire pit, provide hampers with fresh local produce and a cooking guide rather than ready meals.

**Learning traditional savoir-faire.** In a world of digitalisation, the possibility of learning long-forgotten crafts can provide your guests with an experience unique to your place and give people a sense of belonging. Give them an opportunity to learn how to spin wool or identify which wild plants to use to make their own herbal infusions.

**Exploring oneself.** Whether it is through wellness, meditation, sport or experiences that will bring people out of their comfort zone, a holiday is the perfect time for people to take the time to look after themselves and some will seek to turn it into a personal journey of self-discovery. While you cannot offer it all, it is all about offering the option and space to do this to some degree.



# We optimise outdoor spaces during the colder months.

## Dawn Singh is the Duty Manager of Stirrups Hotel (UK).

**What we do:** We offer four luxury pods as an alternative, unique and sheltered outdoor dining experience that increases low season capacity and provides a night under the stars, no matter the weather. They are extremely popular, prompting an influx of business that has resulted in the pods being constantly fully booked.

### How we do it:

To optimise demand, the pods are booked within five slots: Breakfast, Lunch, Afternoon Tea, Dinner and Drinks. This gives a variety of dining choices and a structure to ensure that there is time to clear and clean the pods between bookings.

With regards to heating, we use small fan heaters that are turned on prior to

the customers' arrival to ensure that the pods are warm. Use of the heaters means the hotel's electricity costs increase but the return is beneficial. Additional blankets and cushions are also provided for warmth and comfort.

In addition to the price of food and drinks there is a charge of £40 to hire the pod for two and a half hours.

Initially, the hotel rented the pods but, due to their high demand, we realised it was more cost-effective to buy them; after doing so, we broke even quickly. Our pods are placed in the hotel's garden but others have been placed on balconies and rooftops in cities. This shows the flexibility that these pods can offer.



### Our Tips:

Personalise the pods with lights, candles and a small speaker. Ensure food is covered so that the dishes stay hot during the walk from the kitchen to the pod. Finally, add a buzzer for guests to press when they need service. This means that servers do not need to check on customers regularly, while the guests do not feel neglected.







# Translate emotions into experiences.

## Certain emotional states are associated with seasons: translate those expectations into live experiences.

What do your potential customers expect winter to be like? You can choose to fight their negative perceptions or, instead, you can play into the positive meanings and associations that winter may have for them. Sell the dream and make it a reality.

To do this, accessorise your experience to make it winter-themed. Christmas, in particular, is a time for nostalgia and a sense of belonging, so decorate your venue to encourage return visits, create a winter cocktail to encourage higher spending, organise a workshop to make your own Christmas decorations to encourage larger parties. Here are four themes to try:

**Cosiness/Hygge.** Autumn and winter are seasons of contrasts that make us think of wet, cold and dark outside, for which we compensate with warm and light inside. Whether it is a hot cup of tea or hot chocolate after a long walk, an evening by the fireplace with a good book or listening to old vinyl, or just a lazy sleep under a warm blanket.

**Timelessness.** With the natural elements being unpredictable and shorter days, it is harder to pack the day with activities. This gives a golden opportunity to approach time differently by offering experiences in which time is not of the essence. Promote activities that allow your customers to learn how to paint or draw what they see out of the window, or spend the morning cooking with a chef, or try their hand at some new craft.



Promote activities that allow your customers to learn how to paint or draw what they see out of the window, or spend the morning cooking with a chef, or try their hand at some new craft?

**People.** Sometimes what you remember best of your holidays are the people you spent them with; the unexpected laughs, the deep conversations, the shared experiences. Enable those connections by offering the suitable space and time for it. Market holidays as time for yourself and your loved ones.

**Adventure.** But it's not all about nostalgia! For some, the off season is also a time for exploration, pushing your own limits and going out of your comfort zone. Why not offer winter surfing or an overnight hike to a refuge?



©Norfolk County Council



We offer an opportunity for togetherness and a romantic, all-year round experience with portable fire pits and S'mores. Robert Rezin is the General Manager of Brentwood Hotel (US).



#### Our Tips:

Find a way to meet the growing demand among guests for experiences of togetherness. Sitting around a fireplace and roasting marshmallows happens not only to be that but also to be most enjoyable during the long winter evenings, addressing the question of low-season demand generation if marketed in the right way.



#### What we do:

We set-up 12 fire pits, one for each of our rooms, which create a lovely romantic atmosphere all year round, but especially in colder seasons. We offer guests \$5 packs of s'more ingredients for sale upon their arrival to the hotel.

#### How we do it:

Saratoga Springs has distinct seasons with gorgeous autumn colours and snowy winters. Although tourists may be more willing to travel and experience our nature in late

spring or summer, there is a special aesthetics to having holidays in the colder seasons, if done the right way. We offer portable firepits and set them up in the backyards outside each of our rooms. These fire pits have a box-like shape so that the fire never touches the ground, which prevents any negative impact on the grass and soil despite the frequent use.

At our reception, we offer 5-dollar packs that contain chocolate, marshmallows and crackers - the trinity required

for making the American campfire classic of s'mores - to anyone who has a desire to partake in this activity. It's a simple treat but it adds disproportionate romance to the firepit experience, based on many of our reviews, and enhances the word-of mouth demand.

We also use our website to promote the aesthetics of the experience for new guests, with professional pictures set in both daylight and darkness that show people enjoying the experience of cosying up near the fireplace.





# Get a calendar.

## Identify unique opportunities every month of the year and celebrate them.



©Kent Downs AONB and North Downs Way National Trail



Do you have offers specifically designed for each and every one of these dates? If your offer is always the same, there is no incentive for your customers to book now and your competitors who offer something different will do better.

Brainstorm the different opportunities available to you each month and how you can use them to develop timely offers. The examples below are generic but you can add specific opportunities local to you.

### **Halloween.**

Finish October with a bang; this festivity is increasingly important for customer expenditure, in activities, food and costumes. The market for higher end tailormade experiences is growing fast.

### **The market for pre-Christmas office parties.**

From dinners out to team building days or weekend experiences, use November and December to target the office party market. A sustainability/authenticity themed team building experience gives that otherwise “samey” annual party a new sense of adventure.

### **Christmas shopping.**

Here’s your chance to sell unique gifts particularly quality, locally made goods. From participation in workshops where you make your own personalised gifts to purchasing luxury, expertly made crafts, gifting experiences has massively increased in recent years.

### **Christmas and New Year holiday.**

Decorate your premises to add a sense of luxury, develop special menus for food and drinks. Offer themed Christmases – family ones focused on Santa’s elves, or adult ones focused on a particular theme of music – jazz Christmas, folkloric Christmas. Alternatively, consider

non-Christmas christmasses – targeting people who don’t want to celebrate it or of alternative faiths.

### **Between New Year and Valentine’s Day.**

Promote your experience as a Christmas gift for family members to buy each other and you are likely to get these vouchers cashed in during January and February.

### **Snowdrop walks.**

Incentivise January and February visits to your destination by creating and promoting snowdrop walks, in the same way that you can create bluebell walks in May. Start and end in locations where customers have access to toilets and refreshments.

### **Chinese New Year.**

As a 16-day celebration, with seven days considered a public holiday, the Chinese New Year is an excellent opportunity to celebrate Chinese culture and to generate sales, which is often overlooked.

### **Lambing season.**

New-born lambs signal the start of spring and yet most tourists are not aware you can already see them in March. Promote an Instagram campaign to photograph early lambs at your destination.

Do you have offers specifically designed for each and every one of these dates? If your offer is always the same, there is no incentive for your customers to book now and your competitors who offer something different will do better.



We create award winning events for a growing niche market. Tailor experiences around wellness, self-discovery and purpose Stuart Beare, an unconventional farmer, transformed the family run Tulleys farm (UK).



#### What we do:

With a focus on seasonality associated with the farm, the family developed their “Shocktober Fest” Halloween festival, which now holds the prestige title of the “UK’s No.1 Halloween Attraction”.

#### How we do it:

The use of special effects, impressive scenery and live actors creates an immersive atmosphere and unforgettable experience year after year. The originally niche, but now growing in popularity, Halloween and horror themed event creates an enchanting, unusual and unforgettable event to attract guests, with communications emphasising the unique, novelty experience.

Following a successful summer of Tulleys’ Tearoom, Farm Shop and Pick Your Own (with over 40 different crops), we extended our passion for experiences to establish other seasonal



#### Our Tips:

Create a seasonal experience that complements your current event calendar to increase visitation at less busy times in the calendar year, when there are limited entertainment and event options for visitors. Effective transferable aspects include building an event by taking advantage of existing infrastructure, space, produce and stock, alongside the use of lighting and sound to transform the space and create a completely different, exciting and immersive event and event space.

attractions such as the “Giant Maize Maze” and “Shocktober Fest”, an out of season Halloween event that attracts visitors outside of the farm’s busiest summer months.

Our Halloween festival runs for the entire month of October, offering ten haunted attractions, live music and freshly prepared food. The farm-based festival now attracts over 100,000 local and national visitors of all ages yearly, transforming from a child-friendly event during the day to a more frightening, adult appropriate event at night.

Employing hundreds of local events staff, actors and musicians, it provides employment during a typically quiet month. Catering is largely locally sourced, which is better for the environment and benefits the local economy. Converting fields, barns, tractors and utilising traditional farming produce like bales of hay as props that can be used annually, also reduces costs.



# Create your own events.

## Rely on creating unique events to generate demand in low season.



Events are essential to encourage repeat visits by customers who may otherwise think your product is the same all year round. Also, to attract visitors who have a special interest in the event and might not, otherwise, consider your venue.

Creating your own event can be a fantastic way to bring together your **local community**, highlight your **organisation's values**, strengthen your **brand identity** and increase your **visibility**.

Find below a non-exhaustive list of event types:

- **Art festivals** (music, cinema, theatre, culture)
- **Exhibitions and shows** (hosting community groups and local dance or music schools)
- **Food** (street food events, buying locally sourced and delicatessen produce, learning how to cook)
- **Shopping** (pre-Christmas markets, artists' open homes, make your own gift events)
- **Societal events** (historical event, local celebrity, political movements)
- **Entertainment** (festival of light, carnival, Halloween, shows)
- **Trade events**
- **Unusual/exclusive/one-off events**

It would be hard to create new experiences for the whole low season but we can use events to generate sufficient demand over a short period of time to justify additional staffing and resources, and this can create enough confidence for other businesses in your locality to do the same. Use these events to raise awareness of the resources available and, year on year, to expand your low season offering.

Through local collaboration, one organisation provides the venue, another gives the knowledge or experience, another, the marketing know-how and access to new customers; this co-creation of an event spreads the risk and provides opportunities for shared learning and business development.



# We create original events to attract visitors in off-peak periods.

Sylvain Piantanida is the Site Manager at Les Jardins Sothys (FR).



## What we do:

Reflecting the aestheticism of Sothys cosmetics, the gardens, a real work of art in constant change, are at full capacity during the summer period. That's why we use the low season to design and offer some of our most creative events, with the lower footfall allowing for more intimate experiences.

## How we do it:

As the Sothys Gardens are located in Auriac in Corrèze we benefit from an incredible natural environment but remain relatively far from the main transport routes. To extend our season, we need to "create an event", as visitors are rarely just passing through the area.

As such, while we create each year a new annual calendar of events, we put forward the most creative ones in the quieter periods. Over the last couple of years, we have built strong relationships with local partners

in order to enhance both the use, and visibility, of our pristine natural environment.

This is how, after being certified as a Bird Sanctuary by the Ligue Protectrice des Oiseaux, we could offer bird photography workshops with an onsite exhibition of these photos later on. We work with a local environmental scientific institution to create a monitored initiative called "a square for biodiversity", by creating optimal wetland conditions in a part of the garden, and we use this opportunity to offer a nature and batrachian (an amphibian, typically a frog or toad) workshop led by an expert for young audiences.

Finally, one of the experiences that most fully reflects our ethos of being rooted in nature and aesthetics is our very own itinerant theatre piece "an invitation to beauty" where two performers lead the audience throughout the garden with a poetical narrative.



## Our Tips:

In some territories, not only the locals but also the second homeowners hold a great deal of influence, especially in the low season. Not only are they regular customers but they also bring their own visiting guests. As such it is crucial to offer new experiences every year to keep on appealing to them. Adding extra peripheral services such as a restaurant and/or a delicatessen can also play an important role in retaining a local audience.





# Task 4:

## It's cold, wet and dark: what shall we do?

Work with the seasons, not against them.

By now you are aware that too many companies hope to sell the products that work well in their peak season throughout the year, and this will not work. Does this apply to you? Here is how you can think differently.

List your three top selling products or services in winter.

Now write down what makes them different to your summer products.

Are the differences positive, such that you want to enhance them, or are your best winter products a poor version of your summer product? It may be better to increase your offering, i.e., provide additional benefits to consumers, rather than simply reduce prices.

It's time to brainstorm ways to enhance your products to become appealing winter experiences:

- **Theme it:** decorate for Halloween, Christmas and then Chinese New Year, so your customers always find something new.
- **Make it longer:** mix indoors and outdoors by adding extra activities such as an Autumn leaves family hunt and collage.
- **Make it unique:** tempt customers with small gifts such as a small drink or food tasting.
- **Make it special:** promote beach walks with your dog, which are not possible in peak season.
- **Increase the size of the group:** incentivise past customers to bring a friend.
- **Share it with another business:** Bring in an expert on a certain topic who needs a venue (or offer your expertise to different venues).
- **Share it with the community:** have an open day for schools, care homes, community groups.
- **Other ideas?**