

What was it?

Lancashire Innovation Festival was a month-long celebration of Innovation throughout the county in Oct 2020. The event showcased all the innovation activities and support that is available in Lancashire, particularly for SMEs.

The event featured 31 organised panel seminars and 16 independent fringe events (including the Digital Lancashire ReBoot).

Purpose and Aim

The event's purpose was to showcase the Innovation support available in the county and highlight Lancashire as a place to innovate (helping attract inward investment).

Whilst the event had no specific marketing targets in the first year (reach, audience etc.), we hoped and expected the event to be popular. Furthermore, the use of an online-only event was a new concept which meant we would be learning as the event progressed.

The backdrop of the pandemic allowed us to be ambitious over the scale of the event. Given lockdown was in place during October it was decided to put the event on over the whole month. A month-long timetable ensured we could attract a wide array of Innovation-focused talks and create a larger sense of excitement around the subject of Innovation.

Delivery Partners and Responsibilities

Maya Ellis, Matt Wright and Vanessa Robinson-Hoy were project sponsors for the event and actively responsible for the project. They helped to steer the direction of the event and engage potential speakers.

Dan Knowles led the Innovation Festival project. Dan oversaw all stakeholder engagement throughout the event, including suppliers, speakers and attendees. Dan also recorded all seminars and uploaded them to YouTube.

3ManFactory provided channel marketing support. Their primary role helped to provide content ideas and some of the early-stage planning. Before the event, they engaged with local PR and delivered a social media strategy. During the event, they live-tweeted many seminars and reached out to several local PR partners.

Marketing Lancashire helped inform the brand, shaping some thoughts around its identity, having written the marketing plan for the innovation strategy. They hosted the main landing page website on the Marketing Lancashire pages and provided some email marketing.

Build Up

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the planning for the innovation festival. The original intention was to hold a two-day-long event at UCLan and invite various speakers to a conference-style event. In early July an initial group decided to plan for an Innovation month. Some of the challenging factors we had to consider were the unknowns around the pandemic – would we be in or out of a lockdown situation, and how would that impact attendance? A month meant that across the course of 4 weeks we could identify enough content to engage as large an audience as possible, whilst giving attendees the chance to engage with the event as and when they pleased.

We decided October as there were other complimentary events that we could sign-post innovators to during the month.

The original discussions focussed on engaging SMEs into the event as much as possible. SMEs would help create role models and demonstrate that Innovation was possible in the region. That said, the event also had to represent the region's HEIs and large corporate innovators.

In the build-up some of the other significant challenges we had were

- Assigning the roles and responsibilities for the event and planning the timeline
- Identifying a platform that would cost-effectively allow us to deliver a month of innovation events
- Identify a system of managing registrations for events
- Organise speakers for sessions throughout October
- Create an event calendar and understand the different style formats possible for virtual events
- Create a marketing and communications plan along with a brand identity

In the end, we chose the Zoom Webinar platform for delivery and Eventbrite for management of registrations.

One of the earliest challenges we had was around the structure of the branding and marketing communications. With programmes such as Boost Business Lancashire, Digital Lancashire, Marketing Lancashire, Invest in Lancashire, Creative Lancashire and now the Innovation Board, who should 'own' the Innovation Festival?

We decided that a new brand for Innovation (Innovate Lancashire, for example) was unnecessary. Instead, the event should have its own identity, but the communications would take place through other channels.

That meant the promotional website would 'live' on the marketing Lancashire website. A Twitter account would be created purely for Lancashire Innovation Festival, given the live and real-time nature of the event and conversations. Lancashire LEP's LinkedIn page was used to share content to a business audience. Talks were uploaded to a Lancashire Innovation Festival YouTube channel.

The formal communications activity launched in early September, in line with back-to-school timings. As well as digital platforms, PR was arranged through the local press and partnerships with Boost Business Lancashire to help drive reach.

Delivery

Delivery of the event started in early October. Originally the intention had been to deliver seminars three times a day, four days a week, keeping Wednesdays free. As the event went on more and more people contacted to say they would like to hold a seminar and showcase their innovations and so by the end of the month, the final two weeks we had seminars five days a week and on occasion four a day.

Generally, the seminars ran very smoothly, with no connectivity issues. We learnt early that live streaming pre-recorded video was possible when reducing resolution significantly.

Guidance notes about seminars, links to marketing assets and zoom backdrops were sent to all speakers before the Festival.

In the days leading up to their talk, speakers were also sent individual joining instructions with reminders about marketing assets.

Event attendances varied significantly. The lowest attended event was the showcase of Myerscough College with only two attendees. The highest attended was the showcase of the EIC at UCLan with almost 80 attendees. It is worth noting that the UCLan event was very early on and the UCLan team, especially Iain Martin, were highly committed to promoting the event to their audience.

Typical attendance was between 10 and 20. Speaker quality was generally engaging. The anecdotes of many of the SMEs were useful.

Aftermath

On the whole feedback for the actual event was positive. The virtual format allowed us to crystallise the vast array of Innovation activities and businesses across the county that a geographically restricted offline event wouldn't do. The social media reach and sign-up numbers were substantial. A detailed summary is available in a marketing report provided by 3ManFactory

We surveyed attendees to give their feedback on Lancashire's Innovation strategy, and this returned some interesting thoughts, particularly around social Innovation and Net-Zero innovations

What was good?

- Delivery of a large-scale virtual event in a short time frame.
- Strong reach and excellent speaker roster

- Showcasing the full depth of Lancashire based Innovation opportunities for SMEs
- Library of content now on YouTube
- Numerous actions include Food Innovation Cluster and conversations to connect other clusters-
- Conversations commenced around overall Lancashire support to SME community for innovation provision

What could be improved?

- Increased timeframe for promotional activity
- More streamlined online event system with registrations and delivery in the same place (Hopin)
- Branding and communication assets all streamlined – standalone Lancashire Innovation Festival brand.
- Less input from HEIs, more focus on position SMEs at the front of the conversation
- Reduce timescales for the future event (1-week max)
- In the event of being out of lockdown to consider a Hybrid possibility to allow significant reach and real-world interaction
- Many great talks but more variation required in the seminar format (networking, hackathon, idea sharing, pitching competitions).
- Start planning process earlier
- Announcement in April or May
- More focus on sponsors
- Wider set of partners in events such as DIT
- More formal 'goals' and targets in place for 2021

Recommendations for 2021 Festival

1. Lancashire Innovation Week be held 4th – 8th October 2021
2. Hybrid event spread across 5 locations (watch the following video to get an understanding of [Hybrid Events](#))
3. A theme running through the whole event, and different sector or geographical themes on each day.
4. Launch a Netflix style “Documentary” of Innovation in Lancashire as part of the event to be filmed throughout 2021 – opening the event?
5. Marketing activity to commence May with campaigns fully starting in August, with a big push from September onwards
6. Speaker confirmation by July
7. Identify cost profile and commence sponsorship conversations
8. Work a plan for variation in events, seminars and workshops
9. Seek a Keynote speaker to close the event. Rishi Sunak suggested?