

Place and Resources Overview Committee

25 February 2021

Dorset Council Tourist Information Centres – Service review: consultation responses and next steps

For Recommendation to Cabinet

Portfolio Holder: Cllr J Haynes, Customer and Community Services

Local Councillor(s): Dorchester – Cllrs Richard Biggs, Andy Canning, Les Fry, Stella Jones, Molly Rennie

Sherborne – Cllrs Jon Andrews and Matthew Hall

Wareham – Cllrs Beryl Ezzard and Ryan Holloway

Executive Director: J Sellgren, Executive Director of Place

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Report Status: Public

Recommendation:

The committee are asked to endorse the following recommendations to Cabinet that:

1. Dorset Council stops directly funding tourist information centres (TICs) in Dorchester, Sherborne and Wareham.
2. Dorset Council continues to work with the Town Councils and/or other local services and will consider one-off support funding for suitable transitional arrangements to reduce the impact of the closure of the TIC on local people.
3. Authority is delegated to the Portfolio Holder for Customer and Community Services, in consultation with the Executive Director for Place, to agree any support payment arrangements agreed.
4. Dorset Council continues to promote Dorset as a visitor destination through its Visit Dorset website.

Reason for Recommendations:

- a) TICs are a discretionary service and there is currently disparity across the council area. Dorset Council cannot afford to fund TICs across the whole of the Council area.
- b) To support local alternatives, for example via Town Council, that may wish to facilitate transitional arrangements in place of TIC services.
- c) To provide transitional funding, for example via Town Councils, that may wish to support alternative arrangements in place of TIC services.
- d) To support the tourism sector to attract visitors to Dorset, particularly focussing on extending the tourism season.

1. Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to seek agreement on the way forward for Dorset Council in respect of its approach to funding and managing tourist information centres.

Tourist Information Centres (TIC)s are a discretionary service and there is currently disparity across the council area. Dorset Council currently funds and manages three TICs in Dorchester, Sherborne and Wareham (Discover Purbeck).

Another Dorset Council funded TIC in Lyme Regis has recently closed following the lease expiring on the building it was in. Elsewhere in Dorset (Blandford, Bridport, Shaftesbury, Swanage and Wimborne) TICs are run by other organisations such as the Town Council or a volunteer group.

There is disparity in terms of the council support for TICs across the area and Dorset Council cannot afford to fund TICs across the whole of the council area.

Officers, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder, have carried out a service review of the Council managed TICs to explore what they are used for and how best to provide services in the future in a fair and equitable way across the entire Dorset Council area. The review included a public consultation that received 990 responses as well as meetings with each of the town councils where Dorset Council currently provides a TIC.

The consultation results show that there is a strong level of support for TICs and the service offered both to local residents and to visitors. The consultation results provide support for finding an alternative service delivery model by working with other organisations.

The recommendation is that Dorset Council will no longer fund direct delivery of any TICs. Budget assumptions for next year assume some transitional funding to smooth the transition.

The Town Councils have, so far, expressed differing appetites for providing some sort of transitional arrangements. The proposal is to continue to work with the three town councils to agree what alternative arrangements can be

put in place. This is not about replicating the current service offer as local councils will want to identify elements of the service offer that are important to their local area and they wish to find a way of delivering.

2. Financial Implications

The cost to the council for the three TICs is £212,000 in 2020/21.

In 2019/20 the net budget for the three TICs was £194,671 (year end figure showed a small overspend at £199,398).

The following table shows the expenditure and income by each TIC:

TIC	Income	Expenditure	Net budget /cost to council
Dorchester	£100,154	£184,520	£84,365
Sherborne	£128,882	£193,786	£64,903
Wareham	£100,478	£150,607	£50,130

The council's budget for 2021/22 includes an assumption about savings in the TIC budget with an overall budget for 2021/22 of £168,000. If the Cabinet approves the recommendation to stop funding TICs, there will still be some costs in 2021/22 incurred until all appropriate organisational change management processes have been concluded in addition to any transitional support payments to those town councils that wish to provide some transitional arrangements. If the organisational change management processes result in redundancy, the maximum one off costs associated with any potential redundancies are estimated to be £60,000. It has not been possible to predict these costs accurately due to possible changes in redundancy and pension payments that are yet to be confirmed.

3. Well-being and Health Implications

Providing information is an important part of the work of the TICs and the council is aware that the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic is increasing demand for more information and advice. This could include information to help support people's wellbeing both for local residents and for visitors to Dorset.

4. Climate implications None identified

5. Other Implications

Property and assets Two of the TICs are co-located in library buildings. If the TICs no longer operate from these libraries, there will be space available for other public or community-based services to provide customer facing services. Sherborne TIC is in a leased property which requires a three-month notice period.

Voluntary organisations

Two of the town councils have indicated that they may wish to work with other organisations in the local community to explore an alternative offer and this may include local voluntary and community organisations.

Human resources The TICs employ 12 people (in 5.93 full time equivalent posts). Colleagues have had the opportunity to contribute to the consultation about the TICs. Any change affecting colleagues will be subject to further consultation with this group of employees and Trade Unions in line with the council's approach to organisational change.

6. Risk Assessment

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

Having considered the risks associated with this decision using the Council's approved risk management methodology, it is the officer's opinion that there are no High risks that need to be reported.

There is some risk that one or more of the local towns may not be able or willing to take responsibility for this local service offer and to mitigate this risk we will continue to consider other alternative service delivery options with local business or service providers.

There could be some short term reputational risk to Dorset Council as the current service provider particularly given that any implementation is likely to be undertaken and completed during the summer season when there are more visitors in the area.

7. Equalities Impact Assessment - A full Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed and this is shown as Appendix 2. The headline results from the assessment, together with information collected as part of the consultation, show the following impacts:

- Over 93,000 visited one of the 3 TICs in person during 2019/20
- The data from the survey indicates that the age profile of majority of respondents is aged 65 years or over (48%)
- The majority of respondents were female (57%% vs 37% by males)
- The respondents were from a similar ethnic grouping when compared with the profile of the Dorset population
- 6.5% of the responses were from people who declared that they had a disability. However their responses did not differ significantly from the responses from people without a disability.

8. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Tourist Information Centres – service review consultation responses – report

Appendix 2 – Tourist Information Centres – responses from Dorchester, Sherborne and Wareham Town Councils

Appendix 3 – Tourist Information Centres – Equalities Impact Assessment

9. Background Papers - none

10. Further information

Background

- 10.1. Based on Visit Dorset data, in 2019, there were over 30 million visitors (staying and day trips) to Dorset. The council's Economic Growth Strategy includes support for the tourism sector by developing the 'Visit Dorset' brand to support the visitor economy and promote sustainable tourism
- 10.2. Dorset Council currently funds and manages three TICs in Dorchester, Sherborne and Wareham. The TICs provide the following key services:
 - free information about the local area and wider Dorset including maps, local attractions, bus/transport provision and information about accessibility
 - ticket sales for local theatre and local events/festivals
 - accommodation information and booking
- 10.3. Two of the TICs also have a small retail offering.
- 10.4. There was also a Dorset Council TIC in Lyme Regis. This has been progressed as a separate issue as the lease was expiring on the premises. Following discussions with the Town Council to explore alternative service delivery options, this service has now closed.
- 10.5. There are five other TICs which are run by other organisations such as the local Town Council or a volunteer group. These are in Blandford, Bridport, Shaftesbury, Swanage and Wimborne. There are also some areas in the county which no longer have a TIC such as Weymouth. This means that there is disparity in the offer across the council area.

Service review

- 10.6. A service review of the council managed TICs has been undertaken to consider the role of visitor information and how it is funded and delivered. It is essential that future arrangements are sustainable, affordable and fit for the future. Continuing to provide the service in the same way will not do this. TICs do generate an economic benefit to local areas by influencing visitor spend. The TICs play a role in encouraging visitors to spend more time and money in a locality and promoting the area so that people want to return.
- 10.7. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way in which some services are being used and delivered. More people are looking to find further local information and advice about their area as well as visitors to Dorset looking for

tourist information. During this period, local town and parish councils have worked closely with Dorset Council to strengthen the work that they do together in local communities. TICs are a traditional way of providing face to face service, but their use has dropped with developments in technology over recent years.

- 10.8. Dorset Council provides the Visit Dorset service and website as an important access channel for visitors and tourism businesses. Promoting the whole Dorset area as a destination is seen as important by Dorset Council whereas promoting local towns and attractions may better fit with local town or parish councils.
- 10.9. Dorset Council is facing on-going financial challenges and must prioritise the services on which it spends its money. As TICs are not a statutory service, it is appropriate to review this service and its funding arrangements.

Public consultation

- 10.10. Consultation with stakeholders has taken place including:
 - there has been a period of extended consultation (19 October 2020 – 3 January 2021) with individuals and local tourism businesses seeking views about how people use the TICs and the value of this service. This has been done via an online survey promoted through social media and hard copy survey forms being available at the 3 TICs and all 23 Dorset Council libraries.
 - informal discussions with Town Council representatives from the three towns where there is a Dorset Council managed TIC
 - views have also been sought from the TIC employees
- 10.11 There were 990 responses received. Of these responses, 85% were from Dorset residents and 11% completed by visitors to Dorset. Due to the necessary timing of the review to fit into the council budget process it was not possible to run the consultation through the summer season. Aware that the consultation wasn't going to reach significant numbers of summer visitors measures were taken to mitigate the effect including ensuring the consultation was open in half term week, social media promotion including paid for advertising and work with Visit Dorset to promote it with their subscribers.
- 10.12 75 businesses and organisations and 11 Town and Parish Councillors took part, as did 25 Dorset Council employees including some who work in the TICs. The response size was good for a council consultation of this type and reasonably representative of the Dorset population with a heavier weighting towards the older population (48% over 65 years old). A copy of the full consultation results is attached as Appendix 1.
- 10.13 The consultation evidenced that 82% of respondents stated that they use a TIC, nearly 40% visited over five times a year with over three quarters visiting to get information about the local area.
- 10.14 The consultation responses show that the top three purposes for using a TIC are:

- To find out information about the local area
 - To buy tickets for a local event or festival
 - To buy retail goods.
- 10.15 Getting information on the local area and services was most important for both locals and visitors, including the ability to talk to someone face-to-face with reliable and specialist knowledge. Local residents also use a TIC to advertise or promote their business, organisation or an event.
- 10.16 The retail offer and buying of event tickets also scored as important and the convenience of doing so in one place was emphasised. Holiday accommodation information was important to visitors.
- 10.17 The consultation also tested views on potential alternative delivery models for the TICs. Three options were presented: to work with the Town Councils and Voluntary and Community Sector to provide a service; to cease providing Dorset Council TICs or to provide a local/tourist information service in a different way. 41% of respondents agreed that the three TICs could be run differently and 18% disagreed.
- 10.18 Those that agreed the TICs could be run differently commented that this was because other models worked elsewhere in the county and suggested it could be run by the Town Council and volunteer/community support, but it was important to keep some kind of service. Those that disagreed felt it was important to keep a professional service and knowledgeable staff.
- 10.19 Overall, 81% chose the first option of Town Council and VCS and 16% in a different way; the latter most popular suggestions being working with other organisations such as the library or other cultural institutions, adapting and reducing the current TIC offer or working with local businesses. Other suggestions were to increase TIC revenue and to offer technological approaches.
- 10.20 The survey also allowed for people to include comments which have been categorised into similar themes. The most mentioned themes were:
- the importance of encouraging tourism for the local economy and for employment
 - the value of offering a face-to-face service.
 - Working with other organisations around sites
 - Having knowledgeable staffing.
- 10.21 Consideration has been given to the feedback from the consultation and the following table outlines how the council addresses and responds to these key issues as part of its future service offer.

Key feedback from consultation	Response to this issue
Importance of encouraging tourism for the local economy and for employment	Dorset Council continues to develop the Visit Dorset brand to support the visitor economy and promote

	<p>sustainable tourism as part of its Economic Growth Strategy.</p> <p>It cannot afford to fund tourism support activity at a local level across communities in Dorset. The council's role is to promote Dorset as a destination.</p> <p>The three local councils will be supported to develop some form of local offer that is right for their community.</p>
Value of having face to face service particularly to find out information/knowledgeable staff	<p>The consultation has been useful in understanding more about how the TICs are used as a source of information for both local residents and visitors. Improving access to information will be incorporated to the council's emerging work on a new customer strategy and other transformational plans.</p>
Working with other organisations	<p>Two of the local councils have already indicated that they are exploring an alternative offer and this would include engaging with others such as tourism attractions in their local area.</p>

Town council engagement

- 10.22 As part of the consultation, discussions have taken place with the three town councils in the areas where there is a Dorset Council managed TIC and two of these councils have expressed some interest in continuing to provide some form of local visitor information offer and are now exploring what role the town council can play in leading in this service delivery. All town councils considered their response to the issue and provided a formal view. These are in Appendix 2.
- 10.23 The option to work with the town councils to deliver an alternative service model with them taking responsibility to provide visitor information at a local level would meet some of the elements identified as most important from the survey results. This would not be about the town councils delivering the same service offer but elements of the service such as very local information to visitors. It is not anticipated that TUPE would apply in these circumstances.
- 10.24 Both Dorchester and Sherborne Town Council have recognised the importance of tourism to their local area and were understanding of the financial position of Dorset Council. These local councils felt that there was a continued need for face to face information provision about their local areas

and are now exploring the feasibility of what could be done locally, led by the Town Councils. Both councils expressed the need for some transitional funding.

- 10.25 Wareham Town Council stated that there was strong support to retain the TIC in its current form.

Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.