

# Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee

## 26 May 2022

### Post implementation review for Alternative Service Delivery of Tourist Information Centres in Dorchester, Sherborne and Wareham

#### For Review and Consultation

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr L Miller, Customer and Community Services

**Executive Director:** J Sellgren, Executive Director of Place

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**Report Status:** Public

#### **Brief Summary:**

In March 2021 Dorset Council decided to close the 3 remaining local authority managed Tourist Information Centres in Dorchester, Sherborne and Wareham, following a service review and consultation, and agreed to transfer the service to local alternative delivery models.

Following the decision Dorset Council officers worked with all 3 town councils to agree alternative service provision and contributed to the transition with a one-off payment to support implementation.

#### **Recommendation:**

That the committee notes the information provided in this report.

#### **Reason for Recommendation:**

This report provides an update and summary of the alternative service provision following closure of Dorchester, Sherborne and Wareham Tourist Information Centres in 2021, as requested by the Chair of Place & Resources Scrutiny committee.

#### **1. Background**

1.1 Following the creation of Dorset Council in April 2019, and in consideration with emerging new council priorities, there was an intention to review the remaining local authority managed tourist information centre (TIC) services.

- 1.2 TIC's are a discretionary service and there was acknowledgement, at the time of Dorset Council forming, of a disparity across the council area. Decisions to close TIC's had been taken by previous local authorities and in many Dorset areas TIC's were already provided locally through a community based model.
- 1.3 In 2020, the Dorset Council funded TIC in Lyme Regis closed following the lease expiring on the building it was in. Elsewhere in Dorset (Blandford, Bridport, Shaftesbury, Swanage and Wimborne) TICs were already successfully managed by other organisations such as Town Councils or volunteer groups.
- 1.4 A review and public consultation took place between October 2020 and February 2021 with the purpose of understanding more about which services provided by the remaining TICs are most used and to seek views on how the service could be delivered in a different way.
- 1.5 Key data from the consultation confirmed that the main use for TIC's were:
- To find out information about the local area
  - To buy tickets for a local event or festival
  - To buy retail goods
- This data mirrored the customer information held by our TIC's when operational.
- 1.6 Consultation also tested views on potential alternative delivery models for the TICs. Three options were presented: a) to work with the Town Councils and Voluntary and Community Sector to provide a service; b) to cease providing Dorset Council TICs or c) to provide a local/tourist information service in a different way.
- 1.7 Overall, 81% of consultees chose the first option of Town Council and Voluntary Community Sector and 16% in a different way including adapting and reducing the current TIC offer or working with local businesses.
- 1.8 The conclusion of the review and consultation was to close the TIC's, work with Town Councils and provide one-off funding to support transition for the service to be delivered locally.
- 1.9 Dorset Council aims to promote Dorset as a destination and continues to develop the Visit Dorset brand to support the visitor economy and promote sustainable tourism as part of its Economic Growth Strategy.

## 2. **Supporting Local Tourism – Alternative Service Provision**

- 2.1 All three Town Councils created alternative delivery offers and one-off funding of £20,000 per Town Council was given to support proposals. This was used to support further development of their online platforms, software, and hardware. Proposals also included upgrading of in person facilities, general set up costs and production of literature.
- 2.2 **Sherborne Town Council:** has an active tourism forum and is already providing visitor services locally in Sherborne with support from volunteers. They are engaging with local businesses to become tourist information points and provide some local

support for face-to-face enquiries. They manage activity such as ticket sales for local events and festivals. The tourism forum meets regularly to coordinate visitor services:

- literature containing maps and cycle routes,
- the Visit Dorset team supported and worked with the Town Council to provide a dedicated Sherborne town microsite for the town: [Sherborne \(visit-dorset.com\)](https://www.visit-dorset.com/sherborne)
- promoting their volunteer 'walking guides'
- supporting festivals and events this year via visit-Sherborne with local ticket sales
- planning for Platinum Jubilee celebrations, collaborating with Chamber of Trade and Commerce
- supporting the Dorset Volunteer Ambassador Scheme
- promote visitor information within the town including:
  - adopting a telephone kiosk in Half Moon Street to display literature
  - placing stickers in shop windows
  - town council promoting general events
  - continuing to make signage improvements and alterations across the town

2.3 **Dorchester Town Council:** has an established [Heritage Tourism Strategy](#) to develop the local tourism economy and market Dorchester as a popular visitor destination. Dorchester Town Council is working together with Visit Dorset and other local organisations and businesses to deliver this through the Dorchester Tourism Partnership.

As part of the funding provided by Dorset Council, the partnership has:

- created new printed visitor literature
- developed their digital offer through a new website, app and social media presence
- set up new voluntary led tourist information points at Dorchester Post Office located in Trinity Street.

2.4 **Wareham Town Council:** has already developed and launched their '[Visit Wareham](#)' online offer and continues to mature plans to develop a customer and visitor access point within the Corn Exchange. Once these facilities are developed it is hoped that their provision will include in-person support for signposting and guidance, access to literature and local information, ticket sales and access to online services on a public computer.

Due to the consequences of resetting and recovering business activity following Covid-19, and a recent change of personnel, the Town Council's plans have been delayed. These are now hoped to be launched later in 2022. Dorset Council's Head of Customer, Libraries and Archives continues to support their clerks in implementing their plans.

2.5 Dorset Council has provided assurance to all three Town Councils of ongoing partner support, sharing information and resources including support from our Visit Dorset Tourism team.

### **3. Dorset Council – Customer and Library Services**

- 3.1 Dorset Council is developing its future Customer and Library Strategies which contribute to the overarching Council Plan priorities. Following extensive engagement, we commit to providing essential in-person access to council and partner services, listening to customer needs and supporting our most vulnerable residents and families through their life journeys.
- 3.2 We use customer experience information, captured at all of our customer service points in libraries, to provide knowledge of the services customers need and capture their feedback to learn from their experience. Council services such as housing, council tax, benefits, waste and recycling are the most popular enquiries.
- 3.3 Dorset Council library services are local community advice and information points for all council services including four of our customer service access points. This aligns with our 'one council front door' approach.
- 3.4 All libraries, during opening hours, provide access to online services and will support all customers and visitors in using online services when needed. Our teams have been trained as embedded digital champions and we also host digital champion sessions delivered by volunteers.
- 3.5 Library Assistants and Customer Advisors provide a warm welcome to our facilities and will signpost visitors to Tourist Information Points, online information or direct a visitor to the nearest local facility.
- 3.6 To further support local visitor services, delivered through community partners, we consider holding a limited supply of printed literature, for example a local area map showing where tourist information points are located and local attractions. We do this mindfully to ensure we meet positive climate and ecological change aims.
- 3.7 Dorset Council is committed to promoting access to information with a digital first approach and understand that the majority of our visitors access information online, from booking to searching for things to do, before they arrive. Our customer services and library assistants are on hand to support visitors in using our public computers.
- 3.8 We will signpost customers to our digital champions and promote the courses that are available to all to learn the basics of using a computer, mouse and searching on the internet. Our future library and customer strategies will consider the needs of all customers and ensure that libraries and customer service points are responsive and supportive.

### **4. Financial Implications**

- 4.1 Dorset Council contributed a one-off payment of £20,000 for each Town Council to achieve their proposed plans. A total cost of £60,000.
- 4.2 The recurring annual savings achieved from closing Tourist Information Centres is £168,000. The first full year saving has been delivered in the 2022 / 2023 budget.

## 5. **Climate Implications**

- 5.1 To ensure we continue to reduce wastage of printed materials, and to support our climate and ecological emergency strategy, we recommend, to all community partners, making information and booking facilities accessible through the various online portals, that have been developed, and to ensure these are compatible with modern phones.
- 5.2 Where information, guidance, booking facilities and advice is available online we will provide access to this via our extensive library network, and assist access to this over the telephone through our customer services team, rather than stock printed materials.

## 6. **Well-being and Health Implications**

6.1 There are no well-being or health implications to report.

## 7. **Risk Assessment**

7.1 Current Risk: There are no risks identified for Dorset Council.

## 8. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

- 8.1 An equality impact assessment was completed at the time of the closure and is published on our website: <https://www.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/-/review-of-dorset-council-s-current-tourist-information-centre-service-eqia>
- 8.2 When visitors or residents do not have access to the internet or a device access to information is available through the alternative service provision in place, delivered through local town, parish and community provision, or in partnership with local businesses and attractions.
- 8.3 Visitors or residents can also access visitor or council information over the telephone by calling Dorset Direct: our dedicated customer services team, or by visiting a library. At these access points our customer advisors will signpost to information online through Visit Dorset or local access via a tourist information point or local office.

## 9. **Appendices**

9.1 There are no appendices for this report.

## 10. **Background Papers**

- 10.1 Links are provided to the previous Overview and Cabinet reports and decisions:
- [Overview Committee: 25 February 2021](#)
  - [Cabinet Decision: 2 March 2021](#)