

Appendix one

Providing 'tourist information services' in Ashby de la Zouch – Options

Introduction And Background

In the past decade we have rapidly moved from a position where Tourist Information Centres (TICs) were the primary (and in many cases only) source of information both before and during a visit, to one where physical information points now have to compete with technology driven solutions and often struggle to match the levels of sophistication on offer. There are a wide range of websites and apps available to inform potential visitors about what particular areas have to offer and they are well known and used.

The Smartphone is now a low cost tool available to most and with the increase in free wifi to access networks, the cost of accessing digital information is becoming less of a barrier. Evidence is available that demonstrates that 92% of the UK population (aged 16 and above) now have a Smartphone, which was an increase of 5% on 2020. Currently 99% of the population aged 16 to 54 have a Smartphone with ownership at 83% for those aged 55 to 64, but dropping to 18% for those over 65 (Source: Statista). It would be a reasonable assumption that as time moves on Smartphone ownership will continue to rise particularly within the older age groups.

It is reasonable to expect that the trend towards consumption of travel information digitally will continue.

Notwithstanding the above trend, there will always be inclusivity arguments in favour of 'face to face' service delivery. The question that this council must wrestle with is "at what level of usage (if any) does face to face TIC provision (a discretionary service) become unsustainable? Current statistics show that nationally less than 5% of visitors to an area use a TIC during their visit. The level of patronage of Ashby TIC prior to Covid was in the order of 23 customers per day.

North West Leicestershire District Council's Corporate Scrutiny Committee have accepted that to grow the district's Visitor Economy in the way required to deliver Council Delivery Plan targets, it will be necessary to evolve our Tourism Service activities. It is further accepted that to do this requires resourcing. Provision of new money into the Visitor Economy Service at the current time is not feasible (the council's MTFs precludes this). It appears to be broadly accepted that reallocation of resource is a necessity to achieve adopted targets. Corporate Scrutiny Committee however has indicated that it is not prepared to accept a total closure of the TIC in Ashby at the current time and has asked for options. This paper sets out a series of alternative ways of retaining a TIC facility in Ashby, with a preferred option identified.

Costs

The budget for the operation of the TIC in Ashby for 2021/22 is as follows:

Staff Costs (Salaries, NI, Pension etc)	£62,650
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Premises Costs (Rent, maintenance etc)	£4540
Supplies and Services (printed materials, call charges, card machine etc)	£3760
Total	£70,950

TIC Services

The Services provided by TIC staff from their base in Ashby are set out below. Some of these services do not need to be provided on a face-to-face basis and can be incorporated with other tasks arising from adoption of the new Visitor Economy Plan priorities, as part of new or revised job roles within the Cultural Services or Economic Regeneration team.

Those that are face to face services are highlighted. It should be noted that some face-to-face services are providing a subsidy to local businesses and renegotiation of the basis of provision may be warranted.

Service Activity	Face to Face Service?		Alternative service delivery proposal
	Yes	No	
Customer enquiries (tourism and social/well-being)	X		Retain within TIC facility operated in accordance with one of the options set out in this paper
Box office ticket sales (non-exclusive ticket agents for a number of local organisations)	X		Explore whether any alternative TIC operators will be prepared to continue box office sales. Issue may be that sales income at present does not recover full sales costs
Poster and leaflet display in the tourist information centre	X		Retain within TIC facility operated in accordance with one of the options set out in this paper
Telephone and email enquiries		X	Diverted to Customer Call Centre – supported by a prepared FAQ script. Referral to designated officers if required.
Updating 'tourist information points'		X	Cultural Services and Communications Teams from council offices or agile
Mailshots – posters to community venues (village halls and community venues across the district)		X	Incorporate into wider distribution list. Possibility of information going digital as commitment to Zero Carbon. Delivered by Cultural Services and Communications Teams from council offices or agile
Box office email blasts		X	Continue to include in general what's on information and general mailshots, but specific work to

			support certain venues is public subsidy. Explore whether can be recharged. If not then stop. Delivered by Cultural Services and Communications Teams from council offices or agile
Social media promotion of events and attractions (districtwide)		X	Delivered by Cultural Services and Communications Teams from council offices or agile
Website and 'what's on' data management		X	Delivered by Cultural Services and Communications Teams from council offices or agile
Signposting business enquiries to Business Focus		X	Absorbed into existing role within Economic Regeneration Team.
Promotion of annual tourism awards (Leics. Tourism and Hospitality Awards)		X	Delivered by Cultural Services Team from council offices or agile
Collation and distribution of 'what's on' postcards (Ashby and Coalville)		X	Delivered by Cultural Services and Communications Teams from council offices or agile, with support from Ashby Town Council in respect of Ashby events

Future TIC Provision - Options Assessment

Following Corporate Scrutiny Committee on 5th January 2022 it was noted that members recognised the need to release resource to deliver the new priorities set out in the Scrutiny Paper, but also wished to explore options for retaining the TIC.

Through initial discussions with partners, six options have been identified which range from do nothing (i.e. reopen the TIC using NWLDC staff resource) through to closure of the TIC. The options are described more fully below.

The option of working with Ashby Town Council / Ashby BID to retain a face-to-face TIC service is considered by district council officers to be the most promising. This option would extend work with an existing and trusted partner, retain local accountability, and respond directly to the recent motion passed by Ashby Town Council.

In the period of time that has elapsed since Scrutiny Committee on 5th January it has been possible to hold an initial exploratory meeting with Ashby Town Council / BID which provided some confidence to both parties that a workable solution may result. It should be recognised however that neither party is in a position to formally commit to this course of action on the strength of one meeting and further investigation and due diligence and the development of Heads Of Terms is required.

There may be merit in exploring Option Two - working with Everyone Active as a fallback solution.

The Options

OPTION ONE – NWLDC and Ashby Town Council / Ashby BID develop an arrangement for the continued provision of a face-to-face TIC service in Ashby

SWOT ANALYSIS	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourist information provision can be retained from existing and well known location • Ashby Town Council / BID are already known to handle similar enquiries to those received at the TIC. This arrangement would provide a one stop shop for all those enquires. • Ashby Town Council and BID currently play a role in tourism and wider promotion. • Reduces NWLDC resource requirement allowing other priority tasks to be undertaken. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other public bodies are known to have limited opening hours: • Varying service delivery resilience due to available staffing resource • Potential changes to the services provided, ceasing those services that are not cost effective or not possible to deliver (e.g. services requiring card transactions) • Limited technology in place to support service enquiries and transactions (sales via card transactions etc.)
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaunch of the service to attract new customers • Exposure to additional services offered by the provider 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in the services delivered • Customer dissatisfaction / customer complaints • Long term instability (either partner may decide to terminate the service agreement)

OPTION TWO – Commission Everyone Active to provide a face-to-face tourist information service from Ashby Leisure Centre and Lido

SWOT ANALYSIS	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The premises is owned by the district council • The district council already has a partnership agreement with Everyone Active • The location has recently been refurbished and modernised 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different location requiring current customer behaviour change • Staff would require training • Customers would have to wait in queue with people wanting to enter the leisure centre.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significantly increased opening hours – currently open 91hours per week (including Sundays and bank holidays) • An established leisure and tourist attraction • Customer facing environment and customer service trained and experienced staff in place • Higher service delivery resilience through access to staffing resource • Technology in place to support service enquiries and transactions (sales via card transactions, online booking, printing etc.) • Reduces NWLDC resource requirement allowing other priority tasks to be undertaken. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lengthy TIC enquiries could delay people from paying to use leisure facilities. • Not much spare space in leisure centre reception.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service is exposed to new customers • Relaunch of the service to attract new customers • High footfall and open foyer area • Local organisations can negotiate new service contracts with Everyone Active (e.g. box office/ticket sales, joint marketing opportunities etc.) • Potential expansion of retail sales merchandise / offer (maps, walking books etc.) • Exposure to additional services offered by the provider 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential inconsistency in service delivery due to a larger pool of staffing • Customer dissatisfaction / customer complaints • Long term instability (either partner may decide to terminate the service agreement)

OPTION THREE – Seek proposals from other operators, commissioning them to run a tourist information service/centre, to include the commercial and volunteer sector

SWOT ANALYSIS	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investment in the commercial / volunteer sector • Increased opening hours / access to information • Reduces NWLDC resource requirement allowing other priority tasks to be undertaken. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involved / time-consuming process to appoint and establish the partnership / service agreement • On-going resource requirement to maintain / manage the partnership

OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to additional services offered by the provider 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in the services delivered • Customer dissatisfaction / customer complaints • Long term instability (either partner may decide to terminate the service agreement)

OPTION FOUR – Reopen Ashby de la Zouch Tourist Information Centre with tourist information services provided via a self-serve portal (non staffed) / 'super tourist information point' with further enquiries linking back to the new District Council Customer Service Centre or alternative information provider

SWOT ANALYSIS	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dynamic and up to date provision of information • Reduces NWLDC resource requirement allowing other priority tasks to be undertaken. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% virtual provision of information • Access to the self-serve portal will be limited to 16 hours per week (current library open hours) • Reduction in services delivered (limited to information within the portal or on display)
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To increase the range of promotional information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology failure • Significant investment with low usage • Customer dissatisfaction / customer complaints

OPTION FIVE - Reopen Ashby Tourist Information Centre (current location), providing face to face services to customers with NWLDC providing facility and staff.

SWOT ANALYSIS	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing customers know the location and services on offer • The premises is still leased to the district council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the service unavailable since March 2020 customer habits will have changed resulting in a reduction in customers • The current location limits the hours that the office is open (15 hours per week and closed on Sundays and Bank Holidays) • The current facility is dated and in need of refurbishment and modernisation • Low service delivery resilience due to limited staffing resource

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential changes to the services provided, ceasing those services that are not cost effective (e.g. card transactions) • Two customer service counters in one location is confusing and inefficient
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modernise the facility, refresh, new look • Relaunch of the service to attract new customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited budget available to invest in the service • Reduction in the services delivered

OPTION SIX – Permanent closure of Ashby de la Zouch Tourist Information Centre

SWOT ANALYSIS	
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% of the budget is invested in development and progression of the North West Leicestershire Visitor Economy Plan. • The provision has been closed since March 2020 and customers have been supported by Ashby Library (as part of their information service provision) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of bespoke tourist information and box office / ticket service from Ashby de la Zouch • Loss of community and social wellbeing services • Greater pressure on Ashby Library resources (currently accommodating tourism / community enquiries)
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing the economic impacts of the visitor (attracting more visitors and increasing visitor duration and spend per head) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer dissatisfaction / customer complaints

CONCLUSION

Officers believe that Option One (working with Ashby Town Council / Ashby BID to provide a face to face TIC service) has the greatest potential for success. Through an initial meeting, both parties identified mutual benefits.

Further preparatory and due diligence work is required before formal agreement can be reached. It is proposed therefore that Cabinet delegate authority to the Strategic Director (in consultation with the Portfolioholder for Business And Regeneration) to agree terms for the future operation of the TIC.