
VISITSCOTLAND INFORMATION PROVISION – UPDATE

Report by Corporate Transformation & Services Director

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

1 November 2016

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides an update to members on how VisitScotland is responding to changes in the way visitors now access information and make holiday decisions and, in turn, how this is impacting on the performance of the manned visitor information service in the Scottish Borders.**
- 1.2 VisitScotland currently operates and manages five VisitScotland iCentres in the Scottish Borders, providing face to face information services, including an accommodation and ticketing service. The VisitScotland iCentres are partially funded via an annual Minute of Agreement (MOA) between Scottish Borders Council and VisitScotland.
- 1.3 The report provides information on the performance of the iCentres in the Scottish Borders. Visitors are accessing information from a wide range of sources when they are in Scotland. Trends indicate that online usage for visitor information and booking will continue to rise. In line with this trend, Scottish Borders VisitScotland iCentres have experienced an overall decline in footfall in recent years while there has been a significant rise in website visits and digital referrals to Scottish Borders businesses. Recognising the change in consumer behaviour and demand, VisitScotland is undertaking a national review of information provision and the overall customer experience, looking at the best way to ensure that information is delivered to more people in more places using the channels that visitors use the most.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 I recommend that the Executive Committee:-**
- (a) Agrees to invite senior managers from VisitScotland to provide a briefing for all elected members on VisitScotland’s Customer Experience Strategy and its developing approach to information provision in the Scottish Borders and the rest of Scotland; and**
 - (b) Request that a further report on tourism information provision is brought to the Committee in 2017 once VisitScotland has finalised its review.**

3 VISITSCOTLAND INFORMATION CENTRES

- 3.1 VisitScotland currently operates five 'VisitScotland iCentres' in the Scottish Borders. The centres located in Jedburgh, Peebles and Hawick operate all year round, while centres in Melrose and Kelso operate on a seasonal basis. In addition, VisitScotland works in partnership with Scottish Borders Council and Live Borders to deliver an 'Information Point in Partnership' in Selkirk at Halliwell's House Museum, and with Eyemouth Museum Trust to deliver an 'Information Point in Partnership' in Eyemouth Museum.
- 3.2 From 2017 the current partner model will cease and sites will become part of the VIP Programme. The VisitScotland Information Partner (VIP) programme has been developed to recognise and support the great effort that businesses across all sectors undertake to bring Scotland to life and help our visitors make informed choices to ensure they get the most from their visit. The VIP programme is currently open to all Quality Assured businesses, community groups and social enterprises. This will increase the number of outlets at which visitor information is available.
- 3.3 Tourism is a key sector of the local economy, with an economic impact of £194 million annually, supporting approximately 4000 jobs (2015). 1.8 million people visited the Scottish Borders in 2015, spending 3.5 million days in the area. Of these, 1.15 million were day visitors. The 2013-2020 National Tourism Strategy and the Scottish Borders Area Tourism Partnership's new Tourism Strategy and Action Plan aim to grow visitor spend by 20-30% to contribute to sustainable economic growth.

4 REVIEW OF OPERATIONS

- 4.1 VisitScotland has rebadged its Information Centres and is now referring to the locations as 'iCentres'. The iCentres play an important role in helping to enhance visitor's stays in Scotland, connecting them to memorable experiences, encouraging them to do more, spend more and return again.
- 4.2 However, the way in which visitors access information has changed, and VisitScotland has recognised that it needs to change the way it provides information to visitors. Rather than cutting back on information provision, VisitScotland, in partnership with Scottish Borders Council, is aiming to provide more information, to more visitors through even more outlets than at present. This will be delivered via a new hybrid model consisting of iCentres, VisitScotland Information Partner (VIP) programme, and the delivery of mobile and outreach services.
- 4.3 Visitors are accessing information from a wide range of sources when they are in Scotland. The use of new technology has grown to become one of the most innovative and integral parts of modern consumer behaviour. Trends indicate that online usage for visitor information and booking will continue to rise. These changing patterns of visitor behaviour have led to a decline in footfall at VisitScotland iCentres across the country.
- 4.4 VisitScotland has provided an updated set of visitor figures for the iCentre's in 2015/16. Overall, Scottish Borders VisitScotland iCentre's have experienced a 12% decline in footfall between 2015/16 and 2014/15. They also saw a 21.9% fall in the overall number of bookings made in the same period. The specific results and analysis for the Scottish Borders are set out in Appendix 1, Table 1 and are summarised below:

Jedburgh

An annual visitor footfall of 27,000, indicating a fully performing centre with good footfall, although there has been a decline in numbers over the past 3 years.

Kelso

An annual visitor footfall of 13,000, with a steady decline over the past 3 years, footfall to this site is low based on a national picture with little demand for core services.

Melrose

An annual visitor footfall of 5,000, with a steady decline over recent years, footfall to this site is low based on a national picture with little demand for core services.

Hawick

An annual visitor footfall of 17,000, the footfall to this site is low based on the national picture albeit it has shown an increase on the previous year. This could be due to an improved retail offering at the iCentre.

Peebles

An annual visitor footfall of 22,000, indicating a fully performing centre with good footfall, although there has been a decline in recent years.

- 4.5 As noted, there has generally been a decline in footfall at VisitScotland iCentres across the country due to changing patterns of visitor behaviour. In response to this, VisitScotland has developed a completely new approach to its information provision which looks across all channels – including face-to-face and digital provision, in line with visitor trends and demand. VisitScotland will look at each site on an individual basis to identify whether there is an identified need for change. The Council will seek to ensure that robust alternatives are in place before agreeing to any changes.
- 4.6 In addition to the iCentre provision, there are now a number of 'Interactive Screens' available for use by visitors at sites in attractions and key outdoor locations across the Borders. By Spring 2017 these will be available in Tweedbank, Melrose, Hawick, Abbotsford and Stow, as well as Kelso and Galashiels. If funding can be secured, it is anticipated that further 'Interactive Screens' could also be installed in future in Peebles, Eyemouth, Coldstream, Selkirk and Lauder. VisitScotland has noted that the Information Points in Partnership in Selkirk and Eyemouth will continue to be reviewed on an annual basis.

5 NEXT STEPS

- 5.1 The growth of online channels for visitor information has led VisitScotland to a review how they provide information through all of their channels. Combined with a proposal to review iCentres on a case-by-case basis in line with visitor demand, their plan includes a commitment to provide high quality information and inspiration to more visitors than ever before, through the channels that they use the most. This will include investment in, and development of, its digital channels to ensure that visitors can find, click on, and spend more in the local economy. VisitScotland is aiming for closer working with local businesses so that visitors can access great information from local experts.

- 5.2 It is likely that changes will be made to the delivery of visitor information in the Scottish Borders in line with the current national review being undertaken by VisitScotland. In order to provide elected members with a more detailed briefing on that VisitScotland work, it is proposed that a special briefing should be arranged. This would allow senior managers from VisitScotland to provide an outline of the new strategy that is being developed and would also cover the options for future visitor information provision that are currently being considered. It is proposed to hold this special briefing session for all Elected Members in early December 2016.

6 IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Financial

- (a) The VisitScotland iCentre's in the Scottish Borders are funded via an annual 'Minute of Agreement' between VisitScotland and Scottish Borders Council. This details the delivery of regional VisitScotland marketing and visitor information expenditure for the Scottish Borders. The 2015/16 Minute of Agreement committed £108,000 from Economic Development budgets towards regional marketing and visitor information activity. This provides an annual commitment of £61,000 towards the iCentres and £47,000 towards the regional marketing budget.
- (b) In addition, more interactive screens are now being installed at Tweedbank and Stow. This was funded through the Council using Smarter Choices sustainable transport funding. There will be additional expenditure required to supply any new information screens. Any changes to VisitScotland services and delivery systems will be financed by VisitScotland.

6.2 Risk and Mitigations

There is a reputational risk to the Council if the VisitScotland iCentres are not well used, not seen to be embracing new technologies or are not able to properly address user's requirements. This will be mitigated by undertaking an effective and ongoing annual review process in partnership with VisitScotland.

6.3 Equalities

An equalities impact assessment will be carried out on the new touchscreen information provision in areas where they are planned to be installed.

6.4 Acting Sustainably

The provision of accessible, high quality tourist information helps to make the visitor experience of the Scottish Borders more memorable. Continuing to support appropriate visitor information in key locations across the Scottish Borders helps to support the tourism sector and the businesses and jobs that rely on it.

6.5 Carbon Management

There are no direct implications for the Council's carbon emissions from this proposal.

6.6 Rural Proofing

Rural proofing is not required because this project does not change Council strategy or policy.

6.7 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation

There are no changes to be made to the Scheme of Administration or the Scheme of Delegation.

7 CONSULTATION

7.1 The Chief Financial Officer, the Monitoring Officer, the Chief Legal Officer, the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Chief Officer HR and the Clerk to the Council have been consulted and their comments incorporated into the report.

Approved by

Rob Dickson

Corporate Transformation & Services Director

Signature

Author(s)

Name	Designation and Contact Number
Bryan McGrath	Chief Officer Economic Development, Chief Executives, Tel: 01835 826525
Kate Pearson	Economic Development Officer – Tourism, Economic Development, Tel: 01835 826778

Background Papers: None

Previous Minute Reference: Executive Committee, 3 November 2015

Note – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Bryan McGrath can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

Contact Bryan McGrath, Council Headquarters, Newtown St Boswells, Melrose, TD6 0SA Tel: 01835 826525, email bmcgrath@scotborders.gov.uk

Appendix 1

VisitScotland iCentres Data – Scottish Borders

FOOTFALL	2015/16	2014/15	2013/14	2012/13	2011/12	2010/11
Jedburgh	26,861	30,558	33,646	32,153	32,536	29,373
Hawick	17,240	15,105	14,872	15,157	14,201	13,779
Peebles	21,760	26,193	26,251	27,385	27,594	36,984
Melrose	5,067	8,117	15,312	16,431	14,975	23,498
Kelso	13,192	15,611	15,261	14,943	15,968	18,026
TOTAL	84,120	95,584	105,342	106,069	105,274	121,659

BOOKING NUMBERS	2015/16	2014/15	2013/14	2012/13	2011/12	2010/11
Jedburgh	119	162	131	147	225	270
Hawick	29	57	47	41	72	64
Peebles	63	35	141	63	107	169
Melrose	11	30	88	55	115	192
Kelso	21	27	14	21	45	43
TOTAL	243	311	421	327	564	738