
VISITSCOTLAND ICENTRE UPDATE

Report by Executive Director

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

5 December 2017

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 three 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 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 a general 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 has announced a new strategy for the provision of tourism information 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) Notes the changes to information provision in the Scottish Borders made by VisitScotland and welcomes the increased involvement of local tourism businesses in the VisitScotland Information Partners (VIP) Programme in the Scottish Borders; and**
- (b) Requests that a further report with recommendations for the location of the new regional hub for tourism information provision be presented to the Committee in 2018.**

3 VISITSCOTLAND INFORMATION CENTRES

- 3.1 VisitScotland now operates three 'VisitScotland iCentres' in the Scottish Borders. The centres located in Jedburgh, Peebles and Hawick operate all year round. Melrose iCentre ceased to operate in March 2017 and Kelso iCentre closed at the end of the season in 2017. 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 Tourism is a key sector of the local economy, with an economic impact of £204 million annually, supporting approximately 4000 jobs (2016). About 1.85 million people visited the Scottish Borders in 2016, spending 3.85 million days in the area. Of these, 1.2 million were day visitors. The 2013-2020 National Tourism Strategy and the Scottish Borders 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 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.
- 4.2 In October 2017, Visit Scotland announced a new strategy to address the new and diverse ways in which visitor's access information. Rather than cutting back on information provision, VisitScotland, in partnership with Scottish Borders Council and local tourism businesses, is aiming to provide more information, to more visitors through even more outlets than at present.

The new strategy will be implemented over a two-year period and includes:

- A new regional hub. The location of the hub will be decided by VisitScotland, stakeholders and industry over the next few months. In the meantime, Jedburgh, Hawick and Peebles iCentres will continue to operate as normal.
- A significant increase in the number of digital channels providing content on places to visit and stay.
- A new partnership with Live Borders to identify key locations where visitors seek out information, such as libraries or museums. Heart of Hawick Visitor Information Centre will change hands and be fully operated by Live Borders by March 2019. As Live Borders has a presence in every town, it is very well placed to provide an enhanced visitor information service, beyond the current offer.
- An increase in the number of VisitScotland Information Partners (VIP programme). The 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. At present, there are 81 businesses in the Scottish Borders who deliver this service, including Abbotsford, Melrose Abbey and Johnston's of Elgin in Hawick. The VIP programme is currently

open to all Quality Assured businesses, community groups and social enterprises. The new strategy will increase the number of outlets at which visitor information is available.

- 4.3 VisitScotland has provided an updated set of visitor figures for the iCentre's in 2016/17. There have been some positive increases in footfall in Peebles and Hawick, and stable numbers in Jedburgh. However, Scottish Borders VisitScotland iCentres experienced an overall 28% decline in booking numbers in 2016/17 from the previous year. They also saw a 32% fall in booking income made in the same period. The footfall and booking numbers results for 2016/17 are set out in Appendix 1. The time series data in Appendix 1 also demonstrates the significant changes that have occurred over the last seven years.
- 4.4 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. These screens are available in Tweedbank, Melrose, Eyemouth, Hawick, Abbotsford and Stow, as well as Kelso and Galashiels. 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 VisitScotland strategy 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 good information from local experts.
- 5.2 Officers will work with VisitScotland over the next 3-6 months to identify options for the new regional hub, identified in 4.2 above. The location of the hub will be decided by VisitScotland, stakeholders and industry over the next few months. A further report will be presented to Committee in 2018 providing recommendations on the best location and format for the new regional hub.

6 IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Financial

- (a) The VisitScotland iCentres 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 2017/18 Minute of Agreement committed £107,000 from Economic Development budgets towards regional marketing and visitor information activity. This provides an annual commitment of £56,000 towards the iCentres and £51,000 towards the regional marketing budget. The breakdown of this funding will be carefully considered as part of the negotiations for the 2018/19 Minute of Agreement to ensure the most effective support for the tourism sector.

- (b) Additional interactive screens have now been installed. This project 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 users' 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 ensure that the visitor experience of those coming to the Scottish Borders is 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 Service Director HR and the Clerk to the Council have been consulted and their comments have been incorporated into the report.

Approved by

Rob Dickson
Executive Director

Signature

Author(s)

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Background Papers: None

Previous Minute Reference: Executive Committee, 1 November 2016

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	'16/17	'15/16	'14/15	'13/14	'12/13	'11/12	'10/11
Jedburgh	26,933	26,861	30,558	33,646	32,153	32,536	29,373
Hawick	17,947	17,240	15,105	14,872	15,157	14,201	13,779
Peebles	23,185	21,760	26,193	26,251	27,385	27,594	36,984
Melrose	9,461	5,067	8,117	15,312	16,431	14,975	23,498
Kelso	12,776	13,192	15,611	15,261	14,943	15,968	18,026
TOTAL	90,302	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	59	119	162	131	147	225	270
Hawick	13	29	57	47	41	72	64
Peebles	78	63	35	141	63	107	169
Melrose	0	11	30	88	55	115	192
Kelso	24	21	27	14	21	45	43
TOTAL	174	243	311	421	327	564	738