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## VISITSCOTLAND ICENTRE UPDATE

### **Report by Executive Director**

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### **EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

**29 January 2019**

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#### **1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY**

- 1.1 **This report provides an update to members on how VisitScotland is responding to new trends in the way visitors access information.**
- 1.2 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.
- 1.3 The VisitScotland visitor information 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.
- 1.4 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.

#### **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 **I recommend that the Executive Committee:-**
  - (a) **Notes the further changes made by VisitScotland to visitor information provision in the Scottish Borders;**
  - (b) **Welcomes the increased involvement of local tourism businesses in the VisitScotland Information Partners (VIP) Programme in the Scottish Borders; and**
  - (c) **Supports the identification of the existing visitor information site in Jedburgh as the 'VisitScotland Regional Hub' in the Scottish Borders.**

### **3 VISITSCOTLAND INFORMATION CENTRES**

- 3.1 Visitors are accessing information from a wide range of sources while they are in Scotland. Trends indicate that online usage for visitor information and booking will continue to rise. Responding to this change in consumer behaviour and demand, VisitScotland (VS) is in the process of implementing a new strategy for the provision of tourism information and the overall customer experience. VS is 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.
- 3.2 Tourism is a key sector of the local economy, with an economic impact of £204 million annually, supporting approximately 4000 jobs (2017). About 1.9 million people visited the Scottish Borders in 2017, spending 3.95 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 The use of new technology has grown to become one of the most innovative and integral parts of modern consumer behaviour, including tourists. 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 Scotland.
- 4.2 In October 2017, VisitScotland announced a new strategy to address the new and diverse ways in which visitors access information. The new strategy is being implemented over a two-year period and includes:
- A significant increase in the number of digital channels providing content on places to visit and stay;
  - VisitScotland and stakeholders agreeing the location for a single regional Hub;
  - 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 well placed to provide a visitor information service, beyond the current offer;
  - An increase in the number of businesses, and other tourism operators, engaging in the 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 102 businesses in the Scottish Borders which 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 aim of the new strategy is to significantly increase the number of outlets at which visitor information is

- available; and
  - Visit Scotland, working with Galashiels stakeholders, to identify the right visitor information provision for Galashiels for the opening of the Great Tapestry of Scotland building in 2020.
- 4.3 VisitScotland has provided an updated set of visitor figures for the Scottish Borders iCentre's in 2017/18. The footfall and booking number results for 2017/18 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 Overall footfall figures have been decreasing for some time at the information centre sites in the Scottish Borders, reflecting the different ways that visitors now access information. In Peebles the visitor numbers have decreased by 70% since 2006. Last year the site welcomed an average of 9 visitors per hour. The site made 78 accommodation bookings in 2016/17, a significant drop in demand for this service since 2006, when the same site made 423 bookings. VisitScotland has also completed a partnership handover with Live Borders for the Heart of Hawick site, which will operate as a Live Borders dedicated site from March 2019.
- 4.5 Since rolling out the VisitScotland Information Partner programme, 102 businesses in the Scottish Borders have become VIP accredited. VisitScotland currently operates and manages one VisitScotland iCentre in Jedburgh, providing face to face information services, including an accommodation and ticketing service. This VisitScotland iCentre is partially funded via an annual Minute of Agreement (MOA) between Scottish Borders Council and VisitScotland. In relation to Kelso, VisitScotland currently has a VIP Partnership agreement in place with Visit Kelso which offers visitors face to face information across 20 sites in and around the town.
- 4.6 VisitScotland operations will cease at the Peebles location at the end of February 2019. There are ongoing discussions between Scottish Borders Council and VisitScotland on the SBC contact centre becoming a VIP Plus site, which would ensure that existing visitors to the High Street can continue to collect leaflets and get advice on what to see and do within the locality. It is important to note that there are already 14 VIP Partners in the Tweeddale area, including Glentress Forest and Traquair House, which between them currently welcome in excess of 350,000 visitors each year. VisitScotland is also pursuing a partnership agreement with Tweed Valley Tourist Consortium which would see an additional 60+ businesses from the Tweed Valley area join the VIP programme, as a collective.

## **5 PROPOSED REGIONAL HUB**

- 5.1 One of the key elements of the VisitScotland strategy is the creation of 26 Regional Hubs across Scotland from the current network of iCentres. VisitScotland has had discussions with local partners around which location would be most beneficial for the Hub for the Scottish Borders. VisitScotland has held consultations with a number of key stakeholders in the area prior to making the decision on the siting of the regional hub including Council officers and the board of Scottish Borders Tourism Partnership.

- 5.2 Having listened to the feedback from Scottish Borders Council and other local partners, VisitScotland has decided that the existing Jedburgh site would currently be the best location for the Regional Hub for the Scottish Borders. Jedburgh has been chosen for a number of reasons: the 'Gateway' nature of Jedburgh, close to the national border; the physical location of the site; the scale of the building; the availability of parking; the volume of coach traffic and the access on the A68 from the Borderlands area, all make Jedburgh a stronger proposition than other sites. On this basis, it is recommended that the Council supports VisitScotland's decision that the 'VisitScotland Regional Hub' in the Scottish Borders is located in Jedburgh.

## **6 IMPLICATIONS**

### **6.1 Financial**

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 2018/2019 Minute of Agreement committed £107,000 from Economic Development budgets towards regional marketing and visitor information activity. The future breakdown of this funding will be carefully considered as part of the negotiations for the 2019/20 Minute of Agreement to ensure the most effective support for the tourism sector.

### **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 equality impact assessment (EIA) is not required as this report relates to the continuation of the existing event development support service. A key aspect of the Economic Development Team's work is to reduce barriers to economic inequality and information on service delivery to equalities groups is monitored. .

### **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 at a wide range of 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, 5 December 2017

**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](mailto:bmcgrath@scotborders.gov.uk)

## Appendix 1

### VisitScotland iCentres Data – Scottish Borders

<b>FOOTFALL</b>	<b>18/19</b> To 31 Dec	<b>17/18</b>	<b>'16/17</b>	<b>15/16</b>	<b>'14/15</b>	<b>'13/14</b>	<b>'12/13</b>	<b>'11/12</b>
<b>Jedburgh</b>	18,314	18,795	26,933	26,861	30,558	33,646	32,153	32,536
<b>Hawick</b>	8,383	14,796	17,947	17,240	15,105	14,872	15,157	14,201
<b>Peebles</b>	17,166	20,482	23,185	21,760	26,193	26,251	27,385	27,594
<b>Melrose</b>	n/a	n/a	9,461	5,067	8,117	15,312	16,431	14,975
<b>Kelso</b>	n/a	n/a	12,776	13,192	15,611	15,261	14,943	15,968
<b>TOTAL</b>	n/a	54,073	90,302	84,120	95,584	105,342	106,069	105,274

<b>BOOKING NUMBERS</b>	<b>18/19</b> To 31 Dec	<b>17/18</b>	<b>16/17</b>	<b>15/16</b>	<b>2014/15</b>	<b>2013/14</b>	<b>2012/13</b>	<b>2011/12</b>
<b>Jedburgh</b>	8	33	59	119	162	131	147	225
<b>Hawick</b>	2	16	13	29	57	47	41	72
<b>Peebles</b>	60	68	78	63	35	141	63	107
<b>Melrose</b>	n/a	n/a	0	11	30	88	55	115
<b>Kelso</b>	n/a	n/a	24	21	27	14	21	45
<b>TOTAL</b>		117	174	243	311	421	327	564