

Visitor Information Centre

Municipal Year 2012/13



Task & Finish Membership:

Councillor Burton (Chairman)	Councillor Beerling (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Black	Councillor Cox
Councillor English	Councillor Mrs Joy
Councillor Nelson-Gracie	Councillor Newton
Councillor Mrs Parvin	Councillor Mrs Paterson
Councillor Ross	Councillor Mrs Springett
Councillor Vizzard	

Chairman's Summary

I would like to thank all the Council Members that have participated in this review. An exceptionally high number of Councillors who are not regular members of the Regeneration and Economic Development Committee have contributed and attended many of the meetings and evidence gathering visits. This demonstrates the deep concerns held by Members upon the issue of where the Visitor Information Centre should be situated and the closely intertwined consideration of the future of the Town Hall itself. Indeed, it has been difficult to keep the two issues in separate focus and at the same time look for a solution for one without compromising the other.

The final report here presented is a fair summary of the often detailed discussions and the conclusions that have been reached. In particular it is worth noting the comments about decision making and lines of responsibility when matters sometimes sit across more than more Cabinet Members portfolio. Through the Overview and Scrutiny Coordinating Committee these thoughts have already been fed into the Governance Review of Maidstone Borough Council.

The Committee are especially appreciative of the undertaken given by Cllr Eric Hotson (Cabinet Member for Corporate Service) not to make a decision about the use of the Town Hall lobby until the work of the group had been substantially completed.

The Committee hope that this report will not be seen as simply a series of recommendations about the Visitor Information Centre but as a beginning from which Maidstone can revitalise its entire Visitor Strategy and embrace the many jewels of heritage and interest that wait to be exploited. In these most difficult of economic conditions we cannot afford to squander any opportunities.

Background



In 2011 Maidstone's Visitor Information Centre moved from the foyer of the town hall into the new extension at the Museum. With the foyer of the Town hall empty the space was offered to Volunteer Action Maidstone (VAM) as a customer point.

Since the moving of the Visitor Information Centre (ViC), Jubilee Square, part of the High street regeneration project has been completed and while VAM have played a valuable role in keeping the Town

Hall open and in use there was evidence that visitors were confused about where to go for visitor information.

The value of the visitor economy is often under estimated but it is essential to England's economy. It generates £97 billion each year, employs in excess of two million people and supports thousands of businesses, both directly and indirectly. In Maidstone the visitor economy is estimated to provide 5,000 jobs (7.3%) in the borough.

Looking Elsewhere

Best practice visits to Rochester and Bexley as well as to the current ViC site demonstrated the various delivery models for visitor information. Bexley had recently moved their ViC from a local attraction run by volunteers to the local Library. Bexley has a do it yourself approach with no dedicated staff but multi-skilled the librarians to assist with visitor information. Rochester has a destination ViC with its own dedicated building encompassing a coach drop off point, café, facilities, gallery and shop in addition to the ViC desk and information area. Generally there is a move away from accommodation services and a greater focus on events. This is being enabled through the use of new technologies. Maidstone has a visitor app for smart phones however for events that happen at short notice it is not suitable as it takes three months to update. It is clear from the research from Visit England that there are a variety of delivery models and that the use of new technology is having an impact in this area however; the delivery model did not form part of the scope for this review.



1. That the use of technological tools for engaging with and providing information for visitors is investigated.



Service at the Museum

An initial visit to the ViC at the Museum found that there was almost no visitor information available and staff knowledge and customer services could be improved, this was endorsed by the mystery shopping exercise undertaken earlier in the year by Visit England. The Panel noted that out of the 72 leaflet holders only 19

were advertising attractions in Maidstone.

2. That staff members providing visitor information receive customer services training and undertake the Visitor England on-line training programme.

The Review Panel acknowledged that there is ongoing work in relation to the signage for the ViC and the upgrading of maps in the Town Centre. It was considered that creating a coach drop-off point outside the museum was a good idea.

The Town Hall

The data from VAM for enquires at the Town Hall clearly shows that over the summer a third of enquires are for visitor information, the panel would like to express their gratitude to VAM, who not only deal with visitor information enquires the best they can but also provides maps to visitors and ensure that they know where the actual ViC is before they leave. The Kent business barometer for July 2012 shows that 96% of visitor to Maidstone were domestic and 3.5% were European (European visitors up 1.5% on the year before). The Panel noted that in many European towns that visitor information was usually available at the local town hall.

There is no quality data pertaining to the success of the ViC at the Museum as they have only been there for a year and it was not clear from the data collected how many people were visiting the museum and how many were visitor enquires. In order to quantify the success of the ViC at the Town Hall data collection methods for recording visitors need to be improved.

3. That a consistent methodology for logging visitor numbers to the ViC at the Museum and the Town Hall is put in place to monitor the use of the service.

Making use of our Gateway

While considering the location of the Visitor Information Centre there was a consensus that the Council was not making the best use of space at the Gateway, with a coach drop-off point outside and closing of the Arriva shop the panel considered that some of the space downstairs in the Gateway could be used for leaflet racking and/or a electronic notice board for events.



4. That a visitor information presence in the gateway is investigated.

Structure, Delivery & Resources

VAM have expressed a willingness to provide visitor information with appropriate support from the Council. However; Members were concerned about the internal appearance of the Town Hall foyer, which is still used by members, officers and customers for meetings in the chambers. It was felt that at present there was no incentive for VAM to invest in the space as there was no formal agreement between VAM and the Council over the use of space or length of time that it would be available to them for. It was felt that more thought could be given to the layout and feasibility of the space to ensure that both parties aims could be achieved – quiet meeting space and reception for VAM and a clean and tidy town hall foyer to welcome guests and Members to the building.

The review panel have experience difficulties during the course of the review as Town Hall and ViC currently sit in different portfolios. There was also confusion about the role of the staff located within the ViC at the Museum, who work within the Visitor Economy Business Unit (VEBU) and although based at the Museum do not report to the Museum Manager.

5. That the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive revisit the way portfolios are arranged and officer duties allocated to create more cohesion and improved clarity of purpose.

Conclusions

There is currently no conclusive evidence to support returning the ViC in full to the Town Hall. However; with the completion of Jubilee square and the planned second stage of the High Street regeneration project the panel agreed that Town Hall should be the hub for events in Maidstone.

6. That there should be a Visitor Information Centre presence at the Town Hall;
7. That a ViC presence at the Town Hall be supported through VEBU resources; and
8. That no arrangement should be entered into that would compromise this.

Maidstone has no holistic strategy for attracting visitors to the borough. There are several different groups who have a stake in the visitor economy but Maidstone lacks a joined-up approach and a vision. While it is clear that visitors contribute to the Maidstone economy it is also not clear what value the Council places on visitors.

9. That in consultation with relevant stakeholders that the Council clarifies the value of visitors to the borough by putting in place visitor strategy setting out how Maidstone's offer can be enhanced and publicised.

Thank you

The Panel considered evidence from a variety of stakeholders and would like to thank the following individuals and organisations who have personally contributed to this review:

Medway Council

Carl Magjitey
Ed Woollard

Bexley Council

Philip Ware
David Bowles

Volunteer Action Maidstone

Charlotte Osborn-Forde
Kate Dickinson
Liz Tredget

Maidstone Borough Council

Simon Lace
Laura Dickson
Brian Morgan
Cllr Greer
Cllr Hotson
David Tibbit
Neil Harris

The Committee would also like to thank the council officers and members of the public who took the time to contact the Committee and offer their opinions and ideas on the Visitor Information Centre. All of the correspondences received were considered and added a valuable dimension to this review.

**This report is available in alternative formats.
For further information about this service please
contact the Scrutiny Section on 01622 602524.**

**The report is also available on the Council's
website:**

www.maidstone.gov.uk/osc