OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 7 December 2017

POST IMPLEMENTATION REVIEW OF THE CLOSURE OF TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRES AND REPLACEMENT WITH VISITOR INFORMATION POINTS (REP1591)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. A decision was taken in January 2016 to modernise the way Visitor Services were offered within the Waveney District. A network of Visitor Information Points (VIP) was established which replaced the two pre-existing Tourist Information Centres in April 2016 and has continued to grow and now stands at a total of 22. This includes a mixture of business and community establishments all holding visitor information and providing a very cost effective service that also benefits the network host and the visitor economy as a whole.

2. The Suffolk Coast Destination Management Organisation has continued to develop the self service offer through development of campaigns, website and social media. With over 1.1 million page views in 2017 (45% increase) and significant increases to social media suggesting that visitors are using the site before and during their stay to obtain information.

Is the report Open or Exempt? Open

Wards Affected: All Wards in the District

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 In January 2016 a report was taken to Cabinet to modernise Waveney District Council’s Visitor Services provision. The recommendations agreed were:

- That the Tourist Information Centres (TICs) in Lowestoft and Southwold would close at the end of April 2016.
- That a Visitor Information Point (VIP) network was established in line with the closures of the TICs and supported by the Economic Development Team at WDC.
- That £10,000 be invested into setting up the VIP network and then an annual budget of £5,000 is allocated to support the VIPs from the savings generated by the TIC closures.

1.2 The priorities for the network and service were identified as:

- Accessible information to visitors in the district that didn’t carry high costs to the authority
- A service that covered the whole district
- Continued development of self service through The Suffolk Coast DMO

1.3 When the call for VIP locations was made there was an overwhelming response from all parts of the district and the network was then developed in partnership with local businesses, trusts and community groups with the ultimate aim to offer a friendly focal point for visitor information in places that visitors would naturally frequent as part of their visit. A selection process was used to agree the VIP locations which are in key tourist footfall areas across the district including seafronts, town centres and key businesses. As the network has become more established the network has continued to grow across the district as more and more businesses have come forward requesting to become VIP’s.

1.4 Criteria were created that all VIPs had to adhere to including: display signage indicating they are a VIP (a unique ‘i’ logo was designed specifically for the project), have adequate browsing space to promote local tourism literature, opening hours relevant to the demand in that location, broadband access and be DDA compliant. It was also specified that there needed to be staff on site who could answer questions or at least signpost to the relevant information as well as offer impartial advice and take pride in being a VIP to support the wider network.

1.5 The VIP’s provide an alternative service to the traditional TICs by allowing visitors to be able to easily access free literature and receive information on local enquiries face to face. The network provides a number of locations in Beccles, Bungay and Halesworth as well as in our key resort locations of Lowestoft and Southwold. Libraries and local businesses were invited to offer ticket sales in a similar way that the TICs did such as National Express as they generate a small income and both Southwold and Lowestoft libraries took up this opportunity.

1.6 In addition to the network, The Suffolk Coast DMO has continued to develop the self service offer as part of its marketing strategy with their website and social media the main reference tool for the VIP’s and WDC Customer Service team. A dedicated page has been developed with details on all the VIP’s locations and service offered and this information is also on the East Suffolk Council’s website.
A Wayfinding scheme is currently being developed in partnership with Lowestoft Vision which will see a package of improved signage measures installed in Lowestoft that will improve visitor information around the town centre and seafront and help with navigation. This project is due for completion in Spring 2018 and a similar project is being developed for Oulton Broad in partnership with the Parish Council. A signage project was also supported in Southwold.

The WDC Customer Services team took over the function of being the main telephone and email point of contact for all visitor enquiries on closure of the TIC’s in 2016.

VISITOR INFORMATION SERVICE REVIEW

A total of 15 VIPs were initially opened across the District before the main summer season of 2016 and the network has continued to grow in 2017 and currently stands at 22 (see appendix A).

A review took place in Spring 2017 to establish how the service was working and to ensure that the VIPs had the resources they needed for the season ahead. Face to face interviews were carried out with the VIP hosts which asked for their views on the project to date. It is important to note that each VIP developed their own unique offer using the resources provided therefore had different expectations on how the project would work and benefit them.

To summarise just over half felt that they had seen an increase in footfall since becoming a VIP. It was highlighted that in some cases increased footfall had not necessarily turned into an increase in sales transactions but that the benefit to the wider area was recognised. It was also pointed out that some VIP hosts had already been providing information to visitors before becoming an official VIP and therefore the numbers of additional users were difficult to track.

88% said that they felt visitors were happy with the service they provided. Those that felt visitors were not happy with the service states that their visitors expected a more in depth traditional TIC service that required more time to be spent dealing with the enquiry and offering a wider range of services.

81% said they are getting leaflets delivered directly to their VIP from local providers which demonstrated that the VIP network is becoming established and self sufficient. 62% said they had the right leaflets but the geographical location of the VIP played a big part in this response and if leaflet distributors where delivering to that VIP. It became apparent that leaflet distributors were selecting those VIP’s that they felt were most beneficial to their attraction. Other issues highlighted related to the national distribution company Take One Media with some VIP’s commenting that the mix of leaflets they provided in their stands was not right for their VIP and location resulting in some VIPs seeking an alternative provider or making their own displays much larger.

88% said they would find a leaflet exchange useful to restock their displays or pick up new leaflets therefore an event was organised at Africa Alive in Kessingland which was attended by over 60 businesses and all the VIPs. The feedback received was very positive as the event provided the opportunity for the VIPs to network and share contact details with a variety of attraction owners and event organisers and there was a request to make this as an annual event.
2.7 62% said they had the right resources to deliver the VIP service and as the project has evolved the VIP’s have identified further resources that would help support them to deliver the service more effectively. This included more shelving, displays and signage which was followed up and provided to the VIP’s only if appropriate and within budget.

2.8 All of the VIP’s agreed to be listed on google maps as a VIP which was a free service offered by the Economic Development team working with a local web/marketing business. However disappointingly not all of the VIPs activated their listing despite several reminders so this will be followed up to ensure there is 100% coverage via this vital searching tool.

2.9 Initially there were issues in the VIP provision in South Lowestoft around the seafront with the Claremont Pier and Windsor Gallery in Kirkley signing up at the start of the project however they then pulled out due to the space that the VIP was taking up being required for expanding their business operations. After a short gap in provision, the Hotel Hatfield, Kirkley Centre and more recently the Beach Office then joined the network ensuring there was coverage on and around the seafront area.

2.10 The Economic Development Team also supported a Tourism Apprentice as part of the Discovery Host scheme run by Access Community Trust which saw a dedicated ‘mobile’ resource located on Lowestoft seafront who offered face to face information to visitors for the key holiday period. Access Community Trust is continuing to develop the discovery host scheme and the team will work with them to as this evolves.

2.11 Through discussions with Southwold Coastal Community Team it was decided that a town centre based VIP was needed as the current business hosting a point is up for sale. There have also been discussions around how a model similar to Visit Felixstowe could be developed in Southwold using the VIP beach hut at the boating lake close to the Pier.

2.12 The Suffolk Coast DMO continues to promote the whole of the East Suffolk area from Felixstowe to Lowestoft with autumn, winter and spring campaigns aiming to increase visitors during the quieter months with a focus on short breaks, food and drink and things to see and do. The summer campaign showcased days out and attractions to attract day visitors and the family market and the website and social media campaigns provide information for use before and during your stay. The 2017 results to date show continuous significant growth in the number of users. See appendix b.

2.13 In 2016 (April - December) the Customer Services department received 728 tourism enquiries. It should be noted that there has been a change in how data is recorded in the customer services department, however all enquiries are still logged on a CRM system. To date there has been a significant drop in tourism enquiries with only 103 recorded (January – October 2017). This would suggest that with the significant increase in use of the Suffolk Coast website and Social media and establishment of the VIP network that visitors are using alternative means to gain information before and during their stay.

3 HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO EAST SUFFOLK BUSINESS PLAN?

3.1 The VIP network supports the plan’s Critical Success Factors of Economic Development and Tourism and also contributes to achieving the following business plan actions:

- Increase visitor numbers to East Suffolk outside of the main tourist season.
4 FINANCIAL AND GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Closure of Lowestoft and Southwold TIC’s saved the authority £97,395 per year and allowed an additional rentable income to be achieved at the East Point Pavilion.

4.2 The current cost to the authority is £5,000 per year (retained from overall savings) to provide the VIP’s with the equipment and information they need to provide the service.

4.3 The Economic Development Officer responsible for tourism provides support to the network as and when required and keeps engaged with the service. The EDO will arrange one leaflet exchange a year, conduct an annual review each spring and keep an overview of the VIP service.

5 CONSULTATION

5.1 Consultation review held in spring 2017 which will be repeated on annual basis by the Economic Development Team.

6 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

6.1 Town centre tourism groups, businesses and the trusts involved in the network all have an appetite to continue participating in the scheme however to allow for a consistent service to continue to embed and develop across the district it was felt at this stage the option to hand over the scheme to town groups and partnership would potentially disrupt the progress made. However as the scheme continues to evolve this will be revisited.

7 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

7.1 The new service has proven to be cost effective and beneficial for both the VIP hosts and the overall visitor economy. It has replaced the two TIC’s with a network of 22 VIPs covering the district’s resorts and market towns. It has allowed the business community and community sector to develop their own offer and be part of the visitor information point network which has become an established brand. The VIP network believes that visitors are happy with the service they offer and that they have the resources required to deliver the service.

7.2 The Suffolk Coast DMO has continued to develop the self service offer. The 2017 website and social media usage shows continuous significant growth in use and followers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the VIP point service continues to be supported by the Economic Development Service and the £5,000 budget is retained to support the VIP network and the Customer Services department continue to take visitor telephone enquiries.

2. That an annual review is completed each spring to ensure the service is monitored and continually improved in line with need.
3. The Suffolk Coast DMO continues to be the main source of information that visitors are signposted to before and during their stay.

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