Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Thursday, 14 March 2019

POST IMPLEMENTATION UPDATE ON VISITOR INFORMATION POINTS (REP1763)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Visitor Information Point (VIP) service is well established across Waveney and is valued by both the visitor and the business community as the place to find local information. The service complements the Suffolk Coast Destination Management Organisation (DMO) which provides the main source of tourism information for all of East Suffolk.

2. Waveney's VIP service will continue to operate for the 2019 season and will be reviewed as a wider East Suffolk service going forward.

Is the report Open or Exempt?	Open

Wards Affected:	All Wards in the District

Cabinet Member:	Cllr Michael Ladd
	Cabinet Member for Tourism and Economic Development

Supporting Officer:	Jason Berry
	Economic Development Manager
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1   INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

1.1   The Council needed to make savings while still ensuring there is a service that meets visitors' needs and supports growth in the economy. Learning from other authorities and based on the review conducted, the proposed closure of the existing TIC service was agreed in January 2016. The service was replaced by a model that shifts visitor information provision as the council's responsibility to a collaborative approach that gave a greater responsibility to the business community to assist with promoting what the district has to offer. The model gives a wider range of contact points, virtual and physical which are equipped to meet the visitors' needs effectively. The Council agreed the role to enable the change and support a collaborative model.

1.2   There are currently 20 Visitor Information Points signed up to the 2019 season. The VIPs provide local and specific knowledge of their immediate area as well as information regarding the wider District.

1.3   The network covers a number of locations in Beccles, Bungay and Halesworth, as well as in the key resort locations of Lowestoft and Southwold. The majority of the VIPs have been participating in the project since it was established.

1.4   This model is now being used by Mid Suffolk District Council, Diss and The Waveney Valley area are considering it as an option going forward.

1.5   The Suffolk Coast DMO continues to be the main source of information to visitors.

2   UPDATE ON CURRENT VIP SERVICE

2.1   Two of the Visitor Information Points have closed in recent weeks, but this is due to the closure of the business not because they no longer wish to continue the role. Alternative locations to continue the Visitor Information Point offer have already been identified.

2.2   A leaflet exchange is arranged every year where local attractions, accommodation providers and the VIP hosts are invited to promote their attraction or accommodation and pick up information for their VIP. This year's event is being held on 19 March at Africa Alive.

2.3   Each VIP has been visited recently and discussions held regarding their continued participation in the scheme, how they feel the VIP complements their business, how well used they feel their VIP is and if they valued the leaflet exchange. On the whole all were positive about remaining a VIP, most felt it increased footfall to their business and most felt the leaflet exchange was useful and should continue.

2.4   The Suffolk Coast DMO continues to see increased traffic using their website and social media. Website performance:

- Unique users 36,676 up +50% on 2017/18 for November 2018,

- Sessions 43,875 up 51% on 2017/18 for November 2018,

- New visits 74.95%.

2.5   The Economic Development Team will conduct a review at the end of the main summer season.

2.6   Regular contact with the Visitor Information Points has ensured they are supplied with relevant information, literature, contact details to obtain literature and notice boards or signage, where needed.

3   HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO THE EAST SUFFOLK BUSINESS PLAN?

3.1   Increase visitor numbers to East Suffolk outside of the main tourist season.

3.2   Continue to support the Suffolk Coast Destination Management Organisation to develop and sustain local tourism.

4   FINANCIAL AND GOVERNANCE IMPLICATIONS

4.1   There is a £5,000 annual budget to pay for signage, shelving, printing and such like. This also covers the cost of the leaflet exchange.

4.2   The Economic Development Team provides support to the network as and when required and keeps the host businesses engaged with the service; however the service requires reduced support from the Council now that it is well established.

4.3   The VIPs progress is reported back to the East Suffolk Tourism group.

5   OTHER KEY ISSUES

5.1   Wherever possible there is 'reasonable access' into the VIPs. As stated in the Equalities Act 2010, companies that are refurbishing public buildings are generally expected to ensure high quality disabled access, however, small businesses like shops or restaurants have lower criteria as the cost ratio to the size of the business is lower. All the VIPs that are located in community buildings, such as libraries, are fully compliant.

6   CONSULTATION

6.1   There is regular contact with the VIP hosts regarding usage and visitors' needs. Further consultation with visitors will be required when decisions around an East Suffolk service are being made.

6.2   The Cabinet Member is regularly briefed on progress and performance.

7   OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

7.1   The visitor information service is to be reviewed once East Suffolk Council is established as SCDC do not offer a VIP service and currently use a different model.

8   REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION

8.1   To continue with the well established VIP service for the 2019 season and a review take place once East Suffolk Council is established to ensure a consistent approach is offered across East Suffolk going forward.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee note the report to support the continuation of the Waveney VIP service for the 2019 season and acknowledge that there will need to be a review in order to provide a wider East Suffolk service going forward.

BACKGROUND PAPERS: None