

SUBJECT: Chepstow Tourist Information Centre Update

MEETING: Lower Wye Area Committee

DATE: 29 September 2016

DIVISIONS/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide an update on the issues affecting the operation of Chepstow Tourist Information Centre (TIC) and the options being considered for the future delivery of the service.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 2.19m visitors came to Monmouthshire in 2015, generating an estimated £186.65m for the local economy (STEAM*, 2015). In the same year, Chepstow Tourist Information Centre (TIC) handled some 40,000 visitor enquiries despite restrictions on its operating period and opening hours.
- 2.3 Despite evidence of the valuable contribution that TICs make to their local areas, unprecedented cuts to council budgets have led to a reduction in TIC service provision across Wales and the UK. Many TICs have closed altogether and others including Chepstow have been operating on greatly reduced opening hours and periods.
- 2.5 While the original plan for the current financial year was to open during school holidays only until the end of August, the opening period has recently been extended until 10 November 2016, to give officers time to explore new income streams and identify potential partners to inform development of a more sustainable future delivery model.

3 KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 Chepstow TIC is currently managed and funded by Monmouthshire County Council (MCC), with a financial contribution from Chepstow Town Council. The TIC budget has been reduced from £160k in 2013/14 to £18k in 2016/17. This £18k budget is to cover MCC's contribution to TIC services in Abergavenny and Chepstow. £7,500 has already been committed to a shared service TIC in Abergavenny for 16/17. This leaves £10,500 to operate a service in Chepstow for which the net costs based on reduced opening hours up until 10 November are likely to be in excess of £65k. This level of overspend is unsustainable and other ways of delivering the service, and / or of sharing the costs more fairly with those who benefit need to be found.
- 3.2 While these costs are not insignificant, Chepstow TIC generates a considerable amount of benefit and provides a competitive advantage to the town. The most recent economic impact study on TICs (undertaken in 2012 on behalf of Welsh Government) estimated that each TIC enquiry (email, telephone or face to face) generates £12.79 net additional spend in its locality. On this basis, Chepstow TIC's value to the local area is estimated to have been c£511,600 for 2015. The cost of delivering this benefit was c£65,000 i.e. approximately £1.60 per TIC enquiry **.

- 3.3 Chepstow TIC increases the appeal of the town for coach tour operators and the advice given by staff has a significant influence on what visitors see and do in the area, according to the study. Nearly three quarters of those obtaining information on places to eat and drink and attractions go on to visit, whilst just under half obtaining information on events and paid activities go on to visit / attend. In addition, over half of TIC users who took part in the survey said the information they were given would definitely encourage them to make another trip, which demonstrates the significant and positive influence that TICs have on future visits and spend in the area.
- 3.4 Chepstow TIC currently occupies a prime location in the town, carefully chosen for its proximity to key visitor attractions (Chepstow Castle and museum) and for its convenience to walkers and coach tour operators.
- 3.5 Whilst owned by MCC, the building is part of a leasehold estate (which includes the car park and the public toilets) with uses restricted to the following:
- I. Car Park, and
 - II. Public Toilet , and
 - III. Visitors Centre with Exhibition Area and Tea Room
- 3.6 Any relocation of the service therefore risks compromising the existing TIC service and leaving an empty building in a prominent location with no obvious use.
- 3.6 Consultation is ongoing and MCC officers are currently meeting with groups and individuals who've expressed interest in being part of the solution for Chepstow TIC. This engagement is being done in parallel with the work being undertaken within MCC to identify the most appropriate future delivery model for a range of tourism, leisure and cultural services.
- 3.7 A feedback form is being circulated to collect the views of local businesses and communities on the types of new income streams that are being considered for Chepstow TIC. Completed feedback forms will be returned to Chepstow TIC before Friday 30 September.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 That the committee considers the information and receives a report on the recommended way forward once all the options have been explored.

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* Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor

** Allowing for differences between calendar and financial year data

