

Taunton Deane Borough Council

Executive – 9 February 2010

Core Council Review: Taunton Tourist Information Centre

Report of the Growth and Development Manager

(This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Mrs Fran Smith)

Executive Summary

The Core Council Review proposal for Growth and Development identified a saving of £50,000 from the Taunton Tourist Information Centre to be achieved through a review of the service. This reports sets out proposals to reduce staffing from 3.7FTE to 2FTE as well as revisiting relocation options concluding that the preferred option should to remain at Taunton Library in the short-term, whilst continuing to explore the aspiration to relocate to The Brewhouse Box office or other suitable location.

1. Background to this report

1.1

The Core Council proposals approved by Full Council on 23rd November 2009 included a saving of £50,000 through a review of the Taunton Tourist Information service (the provision of a tourist information service in Wellington forms part of the Southwest One contract).

1.2

The Taunton Tourist Information Service (TIC) is currently based in accommodation within the Library, leased from Somerset County Council. It provides a tourist information service (signposting/accommodation bookings etc) as well as selling maps/guides and local crafts. It also acts as a ticket agency (eg: Berry's Coaches/Ticketmaster) and sells tickets for many local cultural events.

1.3

The current net cost of the TIC service as identified in the budget is £63,610, although the actual cost over each of the last three years has been considerably higher than this. The major costs of the service are accommodation (£23,000) and staff (£103,000) comprising 3.7FTE posts, with the ticket agency being the major source of income.

1.4

The service has been identified as an area where investment should be reduced and accommodation and staff costs inevitably need to be addressed if the £50,000 savings target is to be met, as it is widely accepted that opportunities for further income generation are very limited.

2. Staffing

Current TIC staffing comprises six staff amounting to 3.7FTE. Staffing is the major cost of providing the service and a significant reduction in resource is inevitable if the proposed savings are to be realised. Whilst the most important element of the service is provided for visitors to the area, the greatest income is generated from selling tickets to local residents. It is therefore concluded that there would be an overall negative impact if the ticket agency function were to cease. However, any substantial reduction in opening hours, or relocation to a more peripheral site, would inevitably result in loss of income.

Whilst there needs to be significant savings from the staff budget if the savings target is to be met, adequate resource needs to be retained to maintain reasonable opening times so as to avoid significant loss of income. The proposal reduces staff from 3.7FTE to 2FTE comprising a Tourist Information Lead (Indicative Grade G) and Tourist Information Officer (Indicative Grade F). This is considered to be the absolute minimum to retain 5 or 6-day opening. This staff reduction results in a savings of approximately £47,000.

3. Location Options

3.1 Taunton Library

Whilst the space currently rented in the library is larger than is absolutely necessary for the service as it exists (let alone a reduced scale TIC), Somerset County Council have indicated a willingness to reduce the current rent from £23,000 to £12,000. This option would also avoid any one off relocation costs and would have limited impact on income generation. However, with reduced staffing, issues would need to be resolved in respect of security with a single staffed office as the TIC is accessed separately from the library.

3.2 Market House

There is an opportunity to take over the space currently used by "Help the Aged". (Whilst it is not known whether "Help the Aged" wish to renew their lease, the Council would have the option to refuse any such request). This location would be ideal in terms of potential footfall and prominence. The building also has an appropriate amount of space to provide a satisfactory Tourist Information Service, although it represents a much smaller area than that at the library. However, the Council would lose its current rental income meaning that in financial terms there would be no material benefit arising from this option. This option also doesn't afford the opportunity to share resources as is the case with others. Concerns have also been raised that this option could ultimately stifle the regeneration of the building as a whole.

3.3 Existing town centre retail business

The option of sharing with a retailer has been discounted as not being commercially viable (The Buckley Young report suggested that there is no model anywhere in the UK where TICs make a profit).

3.4 County Museum

There would be clear advantages from co-location with one of the town's major tourist attractions. The museum represents a good town centre location, although the space that could be made available would be limited for even a reduced service. The timescales for re-opening the Museum would prevent relocation until early 2011.

3.5 The Deane House Reception

This option would avoid paying any accommodation costs and would also involve only minimal set up costs. It would also open up the future option of management of the service as part of the South West one contract. However, The Deane House is poorly located in comparison with the other options considered and opening of the building at weekends could prove problematic.

3.6 Brewhouse Theatre and Arts Centre

The relocation of the service to The Brewhouse has already been considered. In September 2009 the Executive resolved to progress further work to explore such a move. However, many of the issues previously identified would be mitigated if it were to be a reduced size service, requiring less counter and storage space.

Sufficient space should be available within the existing Box Office, and the Brewhouse has already applied for financial assistance with the aim of refurbishing this area. The two uses are clearly complementary, the TIC being a similar type of function to the Box Office, (which could lead to sharing of resources to maximise opening hours). It would also enable consideration of options in terms of ultimately providing a shared service, as well as enhancing footfall to the Box Office and therefore potentially improve the viability of the venue. Whilst relocation to the Green Room was previously explored, a reduced TIC could be accommodated within the existing box office area, although issues around security and storage would need to be given careful consideration.

The Brewhouse is located in a town centre location, and although not on a main shopping street, the TIC would undoubtedly benefit from linked trips. Developments associated with Project Taunton will ultimately raise the profile of this area considerably. Accurate comparisons with the current location in terms of its attractiveness are difficult to quantify, although it is accepted that relocation would inevitably reduce custom at least in the short term. The overall savings proposed do take account of some potential loss of income.

4. Representations and Community Scrutiny Committee

4.1 Letters have been received from a number of members of the public who really appreciate the high quality service currently provided by the TIC staff and feel that the existing location is the most appropriate, whilst relocation to The Brewhouse would result in a significant loss of trade. The Taunton Chamber of Trade has written also concerned that relocation to The Brewhouse cannot be justified financially, particularly now the rent at the library is to be reduced.

The Chamber of Trade considers that the TIC is “a community service” that needs to be in close proximity to the community it serves and that that relocation should not be considered until developments at Firepool and the redevelopment of the current site take place. Taunton and District Civic Society made similar representations to The Community Scrutiny Committee on 26th January 2010.

4.2 Unison also made representations to the Community Scrutiny Committee. Unison considers relocation to be premature and that it has not been demonstrated that a TIC at The Brewhouse could maintain income where footfall is less. Unison is prepared to consider the option of voluntary redundancies, which in addition to the one off saving of relocation could meet the £50,000 saving target. They consider that relocation combined with staff reduction as proposed will render the service unviable.

4.3 As stated above the Community Scrutiny Committee considered this proposal on 26 January 2010 and made three recommendations:-

- Retain the Tourist Information Centre in its current location;
- Carry out a detailed review of locations; and
- Staffing levels be reduced in line with the Core Council Review;

5.0 Conclusions

In order to achieve target savings, it will be necessary to radically reorganise and reduce the Tourist Information service. The only real options for savings are in staffing and location costs and a reduction from 3.7FTE to 2FTE is therefore essential as it is not considered that relocation (other than to Deane House) would achieve accommodation savings materially greater than those already achieved as a result of the County Council reducing the cost of the current space rented at the library. However, it must also be recognised that the proposed staff reduction will have some impact in terms of the level of service to be provided.

Whilst remaining at the Library would avoid one-off relocation costs and potential for reduced income as a result of a decrease in footfall, with the proposed staff reduction there continue to be obvious benefits from co-location with a similar function such as The Brewhouse Box Office or Museum Reception in the longer term.

Recommendation:-

It is recommended that the proposed staff reduction from 3.7FTE to 2FTE be approved, and that the Tourist Information Centre should remain at its current location in the short-term (at least until after the 2010 Summer season) whilst the preferred longer-term options of relocation to The Brewhouse Theatre and Arts Centre or other suitable premises are explored further.