

Taunton Deane Borough Council

Executive - 19 January 2011

Review of the Location of the Taunton Tourist Information Centre

Report of the Economic Development Specialist

(This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Norman Cavill)

Executive Summary

As part of the Core Council Review earlier this year Officers were instructed to review the location of the Taunton Tourist Information Centre. This report presents the findings of that review and, having looked at alternative locations for the TIC, recommends that the service remains at its current location in the short term.

1. Background to this report

- 1.1 The Taunton Tourist Information Service (TIC) is currently based in accommodation within the Library, leased from Somerset County Council. It provides an important element of the Economic Development service, providing tourist information services (signposting/accommodation bookings etc) as well as selling maps/guides and local crafts. It also acts as a ticket agency (eg: Berry's Coaches/Superbreak) and sells tickets for many local cultural events.
- 1.2 As part of the Core Council Review carried out earlier this year significant savings were sought in relation to the TIC, including within staffing levels and accommodation costs. That resulted in staffing numbers being cut and greater emphasis put on sales and income from commissions. Officers have also investigated alternative premises within the town centre, which would lead to reduced running costs without compromising the level of service provided.
- 1.3 The Executive considered a report on 9th February 2010, which informed Members of progress made in reducing staffing costs and identifying alternative premises. This report deals only with the accommodation issue.
- 1.4 The Corporate Scrutiny Committee considered this item at its meeting on 16th December 2010, and recommended that the TIC should remain at its present location for the foreseeable future, albeit with better signage. Members of the Committee made additional comments on the report, which are summarised in Section 11.

2. Location options

2.1 In the report considered by The Executive on 9th February, Members were presented with various relocation suggestions. This report provides an update on the current opportunities in relation to those properties.

2.2 Existing Location - Taunton Library

Since consideration of the February report the Council has signed a 3 year lease with Somerset County Council to extend the TIC's existing accommodation adjacent to the library, to 31 March 2013. That lease reduced the rent from £23,000 to £12,000 pa. Were the Council to surrender the lease before the end of its term a payment of 12 months rent would be required.

Whilst the current TIC has limited visibility within the town centre, it has distinct benefits, including the amount of space available (150sqm in total), and its location near to the main car parks, which new visitors to the town would use. This option would avoid any one off relocation and refurbishment costs.

2.3 Market House

In September this year Age Concern surrendered the lease on its retail unit within Market House, returning vacant possession to the Council. The property totals 100sqm, though around only a third of that is on the ground floor. Were the Council to relet the property South West One estimates that it could achieve around £11,000 pa rental income for the whole premises but this would be less if just the ground floor space was occupied.

The TIC Manager has viewed the property. His view is that while the available unit is in a prime location, with excellent profile, the amount of space available on the ground floor would be very limiting.

Were the centre to relocate to that property it would require significant refurbishment work, estimated around £20,000, to include the provision of suitable wheelchair access.

2.4 County Museum

The refurbishment of the County Museum has progressed significantly, and the County Council is aiming to open the new centre in late Summer 2011. No provision has been made in the property for the kind of space required by the TIC. However the TIC Manager is working with the Museum Project Manager over cross promotion of both services.

2.5 The Deane House Reception

This option would avoid paying any accommodation costs and would involve lower refurbishment / fit out costs than other locations. 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 the opening of the building at weekends could prove problematic.

2.6 Brewhouse Theatre and Arts Centre

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, and it would encourage footfall through Somerset Square. Shared use of the property might also lead to shared box office and ticketing facilities, and ultimately shared staffing resources.

The TIC Manager has met with the CEO of the Brewhouse Theatre, and the latter has provided an estimate of the costs involved in the potential relocation. In summary they would be:

- Desk space, use of 20/25 sqm of space in the entrance area and limited storage on site £13,000 pa
- One off conversion/ refurbishment costs: £22,000

The annual 'rent' alone would lead to increased costs for the Council for a significantly smaller space.

3.0 Conclusions

- 3.1 Since consideration of the previous report in February the accommodation costs of the TIC have been reduced, through the successful renegotiation of the lease agreement on the library with the County Council. Whilst it is acknowledged that there are relative advantages of various of the options, Officers recommend that the TIC remains in the existing accommodation in the short term for the following reasons:
1. The one-off costs of refurbishment and relocation of each of the other options;
 2. The disruption to customers caused by moving the service;
 3. The lease (and financial) commitment in the current location;
 4. The reduction in space offered in the other options.
- 3.2 In discussing the accommodation requirements of the TIC with the Brewhouse the opportunity to share booking and ticketing costs was explored, and it is anticipated that those discussions will be continued irrespective of co-location.
- 3.3 Officers recommend that the TIC remains in the current property for the next 2 or 3 years but the Council needs to be mindful that opportunities may arise in the meanwhile to revisit this issue. For example, proposals to redevelop the library as part of the larger town centre regeneration are currently estimated to be 2-3 years away. That redevelopment will impact directly on the current location of the TIC and may create the opportunity for a new, bespoke centre. Furthermore, the lease on the main part of the Market House expires in 2015, which would provide the opportunity for the Council to take vacant possession of the whole property. Finally, should the Brewhouse be successful in attracting funding to enable an extension to the theatre it would make sense to discuss co-location at the early, design stage.

4. Finance Comments

4.1 The re-negotiation of the rent to £12,000 makes the current location the lowest cost, practical option. In addition, by remaining at the library there is no need to incur relocation and fitting-out costs.

5. Legal Comments

5.1 tbc.

6. Links to Corporate Aims

6.1 This proposal links to the Regeneration Aim of the Corporate Strategy.

7. Environmental and Community Safety Implications

7.1 There are no direct Environmental and Community Safety implications of this report at this stage.

8. Equalities Impact

8.1 There are no equalities implications at this stage.

9. Risk Management

9.1 The main risks associated with the report relate to the potential loss of custom to the TIC, and therefore income to the Council. It is Officers' view that the course of action recommended would result in the lowest risk to the Council in that regard.

10. Partnership Implications

10.1 There are no direct partnership implications of this report

11. Corporate Scrutiny Recommendation

11.1 The Corporate Scrutiny Committee considered this item at its meeting on 16th December 2010. During the discussion o Members made the following comments and asked questions:

- The Brewhouse Theatre should be more supportive of the Council in providing a suitable location for the Tourist Information Centre;
- Whilst footfall could reduce if the Tourist Information Centre was relocated to the Brewhouse, it could bring additional business to that area of town;
- Long term plans should be made to ensure a suitable location in the future; and
- More signage should be provided for the Tourist Information Centre.

11.2 The Committee resolved that:

(1) The continued location of the Tourist Information Centre in its current position for the duration of its lease be supported; and

(2) Executive Councillor Cavill be requested to consider providing additional signage for the Tourist Information Centre.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Taunton TIC remains in its current location, adjacent to the Library, for the remainder of its lease.

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