

Taunton Deane Borough Council

Executive – 16 September 2009

Possible relocation of Taunton TIC to the Brewhouse

Report of the Interim Economic Development Manager

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

Executive Summary

This is a headline report looking at the potential feasibility of the relocation of Taunton Tourist Information Centre to the Brewhouse Theatre in Taunton.

This report is without detailed analysis and negotiation of costs, which if approval to progress is given will be undertaken by the Asset Management function.

Recommendation

It is recommended that approval given to progress further work to explore the full cost implications of relocating Taunton Tourist Information (TIC) to the Brewhouse Theatre in a phased approach:

- Phase one - relocation to the Green Room in isolation to the Brewhouse Box Office Activity.
- Phase two - identify synergies and ways of increasing collaborative working
- Phase three - possible full integration of box office activity at a future date.

1. Background to this report

This paper has been produced to give a high-level feasibility study and identification of the options if the Taunton Tourist Information Centre (TIC) were to be relocated from its current site in the Library, Paul Street to within the Brewhouse Theatre building at Coal Orchard.

The paper has been produced in consultation with the Brewhouse Theatre as one of the conditions agreed by Executive on the 17th June 2009. The condition stated that the Brewhouse Theatre would work “with Taunton Deane in connection with the joint

location of the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) be progressed, together with works to enable Taunton Deane to formulate a robust business plan for the potential move. Clear, measurable and acceptable progress to the Council shall be made by September 2009”.

The study considers options ranging from renting space within the Brewhouse building to relocation with full integration of the Box Office activity.

Two locations within the Brewhouse are to be considered. The first option is the space in the current Box Officer / Foyer area. The second option is the ‘Green Room’ within the building.

The paper provides some broad indicative possible costs and impact. If approval is given for this work to progress, a job task will be raised with Asset Management to produce a full report with detailed costings.

2. TDBC Tourism and Taunton Tourist Information Centre background

Tourism plays a vital role in the economy of Taunton Deane and the vibrancy of Taunton town centre. The 2007 Value of Tourism Report produced by South West Tourism shows that the tourism industry is worth £167m per annum, supporting 3,123 jobs with 284,000 staying visitors and 1.7million day visitors. The tourism function and Taunton Tourist Information Centre contribute directly to this.

Taunton Tourist Information Centre transferred to the full control and funding by Taunton Deane Borough Council on 1st April 2005. Since transferring across the centre has developed three main areas of operation. 1) Tourist Information, 2) Ticket Centre for many local, regional and national events and 3) Travel Centre, acting as booking agent for companies including National Express, Berry’s Coaches, Brittany Ferries, Bakers Dolphin, Butlins and Haven.

The level of professionalism of the TIC has been recognised through good results in the annual Mystery Shopper study by Visit Britain and winning the National Express Agency of the Year regional and national awards.

The ‘Winning: A tourism strategy for 2012 and beyond’ published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), in partnership with Visit Britain and Visit London aims to deliver a first-class welcome for all visitors through the provision of fully accessible facilities and information. Through this Taunton TIC has been designated an ‘Official Partner’ by Visit Britain.

National Research by Visit Britain shows that TIC’s in England generated an additional £170.2m for the visitor economy. Approximately 25 million people visited a TIC in England in 2008, of these it is estimated that 14.4 million were tourists.

In the 2008 – 2011 Taunton Deane Borough Council Corporate Strategy the identification of a suitable site for the relocation of Taunton Tourist Information Centre was listed as a priority due to the forthcoming redevelopment of the existing site as part of Project Taunton developments. This is no longer listed in the Corporate Strategy as Project Taunton have confirmed the demolition of the multi storey car park is unlikely to happen in the next three years.

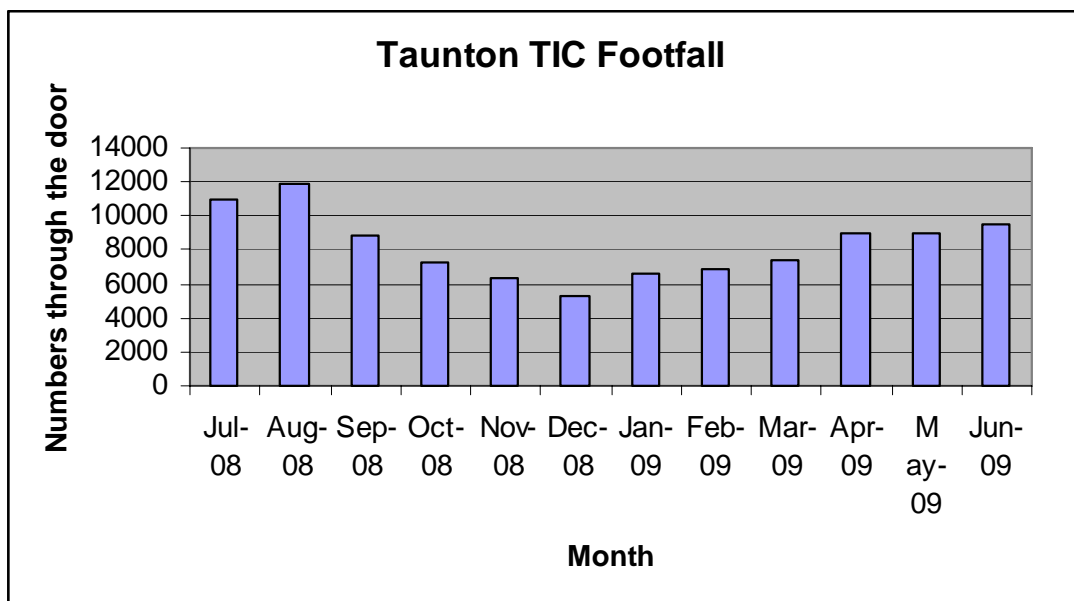
Table One: Taunton TIC Statistics July 2008 – June 2009

| | |
|--|--------|
| Throughput (Footfall) | 98,832 |
| Counter enquiries from UK visitors | 32,202 |
| Counter enquiries from overseas visitors | 4,704 |
| Travel centre enquiries | 21,048 |
| Emails received (tauntontic@tauntondeane.gov.uk) | 1,001 |
| Telephone calls received | 21,613 |
| Brochures dispatched | 2,720 |
| Number of accommodation bookings made by the centre | 260 |

Taunton Tourist Information Centre Profit and Loss

Please see the Financial summary in Appendix One of the attached Buckley Young Associates Ltd review of Taunton Tourist Information, Ticket and Travel Centre report.

Table Two: Taunton TIC Footfall



3. Location options within the Brewhouse

3.1 Location Option One: Existing Box Office / Foyer area in the Brewhouse

Strengths and opportunities lie in using this area, as it is well known and frequented by users of the Theatre. It would allow for a one-stop shop for all ticket sales in the town. However the floor space available is limited and therefore it may prove difficult to accommodate the TIC service. At the moment public access to this part of the building is less prominent and less inviting, this would need to be addressed as part of a re-fit.

Questions have been raised concerning the need for separate counters, to be allocated for the Brewhouse box office and the TIC. If this were to be the case could this be achieved in this part of the building especially on occasions when the theatre is filled to capacity?

The TIC would require some 'back-office' space to allow the TIC storage for leaflets, at least one workstation and room for filing cabinets. If this is unavailable the TIC would have to seek alternatives elsewhere. All parties have agreed a full refit of this area would be required to accommodate everyone and this is a cost that would be need to be borne either jointly or by TDBC.

Security of TIC operation – the space proposed will be open and available to others out of hours, TDBC would need to ensure it adopts a design and style that protects its equipment and material. Suitable storage facilities for cash (e.g. a safe) would need to be provided. This risk would be mitigated by using the Green Room which can be locked and secured.

3.2 Location Option Two: The 'Green Room' at the Brewhouse

This space provides greater opportunities to both parties, whether as a separate TIC or combined operation. It could provide a 'front-of-house welcome' to the whole Theatre and the many services lying within its building. The bigger, lighter unit would allow for a larger Tourist Information Centre to be established (than if the service was located within the current box-office) and it could allow for storage and back office facilities to be created through the use of screening, this could reduce refit costs. Being in a (distinct) separate part of the building the TIC would be able to secure and lock its facility when the service is closed.

The historical nature of the 'Green Room' would make it more attractive to customers and with more space we could work with other partners such as Project Taunton to promote their work. This area would also require a refit but this could be done with less impact and in isolation to the Brewhouse, its operation and the footfall through the building.

4. Service Options

4.1 Relocate the TIC operation in isolation from the Brewhouse box office operation

This option would be the easiest to achieve as it would simply require the TIC to take over and rent existing space. It would allow TDBC to review the TIC services, review its operation and identify any hardware upgrades required in isolation to the Brewhouse operation.

4.2 Relocate the TIC operation with a full merger of box office services – all run by TDBC.

For the customer a one-stop shop approach is the most attractive and user-friendly. It would provide a central contact for ensuring and building a high quality customer focussed service, which would benefit both parties. A joint box-office would work to

meet some of the aims of the Taunton Cultural Consortium who are currently investigating joined up working with regards events taking place and the promotion of these within the town.

Drawbacks exist in that both teams contain team members with specialist knowledge of their service built up over many years. Merging two teams together creates training implications and anomalies in pay and remuneration. A new merged service may require new ICT and box office systems to operate and this has a cost. Conflict may arise over accessing customer databases currently held by both organisations. These new costs would need determining and negotiation would be required over who would provide the funding for this.

The opening hours for the two operations differ with the TIC open Monday to Saturday 9.30am to 5.00pm and the Brewhouse Box-Office open Monday to Saturday 10am to 8pm (6pm on non-performance days or later for special shows when the box office may remain open until 9pm). Some form of harmonised opening hours would be required and there would be staffing and budget implications.

Both services are well established and have a loyal customer base. The smooth transition and communication of any relocation and possible merger is fundamental to future success for all involved.

5. Budget Implications

| Item | Cost |
|--|---|
| Rent | To be negotiated and confirmed |
| Refit of Brewhouse to accommodate TIC | Approx. £30,000 (Burnham-on-Sea TIC refit cost in 2006) |
| Impact to TIC budget if income targets are not met after relocation | Unknown |
| All TDBC produced tourism literature promotes Taunton TIC and its current contact details. All literature would need re-printing with the new contact details. | £1000 per leaflet |
| Town Centre finger post signage amends / replacement | To be confirmed |
| New Box Office System | Unknown |
| Publicity and Marketing | To be confirmed |
| Setting up of direct IT links to TDBC IT System | To be confirmed |
| EPOS System | £1750 approx. |
| Telephone system | £1250 approx. |

6. Next Steps

If agreement to progress exploring the options is given, the following requires further investigation:

- **TIC Location within The Brewhouse Building**
Further exploration and a decision on whether to locate in the current box office area or Green Room must be made. The Brewhouse are open to the

idea of the TIC using either the Box Officer or Green Room area. Both parties need to be mindful of costs of relocating the box office system (to Green Room) and this would be considered should the need arise by Asset Management.

- **TIC Market Research**

Ensuring that the relevant people have access to the TIC is fundamental. The TIC remit is to improve the visitor experience to Taunton (Deane) and to provide products and service to improve the economy of Taunton.

Visitor and statistical research relevant to the potential TIC market is required i.e. footfall figures for 'Coal Orchard' area would need researching as there are no current figures in existence.

The Brewhouse total attendance / participations in 2008 was 114,964. This figure does not include café customers or conference delegates and is mainly achieved during evening hours when the current TIC operation is closed. Daytime footfall figures of the Brewhouse and external areas are required. The annual library footfall figure is in excess of 500,000. This does not take account of Paul St footfall including people movements to and from Paul St Multi Storey car park.

The current location of the TIC limits its operations, as it is located in a tertiary shopping area. This is a sufficient distance from the primary shopping streets meaning only pedestrians using Paul Street, the library and the Multi Storey Car Park pass the current TIC. This results in only those who know its location or seek it out can access it. The TIC needs a location with higher footfall / passing trade. The Brewhouse location does not appear to provide this at this time.

In 2008 TDBC commissioned Buckley Young Associates to produce a 'Review of Taunton TIC Report'. Buckley Young Associates identified that there can be little doubt that if Taunton TIC were to move to a more prominent town centre premises; the visitor traffic would increase substantially.

During the review process Buckley Young Associates were unable to find any Tourist Information Centres that operate without a subsidy.

- **Replacement Box Office System**

If a merger of box office operations occurs a new box office system is required. The Brewhouse have stated a new system would be required and that sharing this cost would be cost effective for both organisations. In addition the Brewhouse state that it is likely their box office system will be updated shortly at little cost to them.

- **Box Office Commission**

As part of any negotiations should a box office merger be considered, there will be a need to negotiate the level of income TDBC would gain from running this service.

- **Income Projections**

Without understanding whether the TIC will relocate or not, or whether it will take over the running of the box office it is difficult to forecast income projections other than stating what is currently achieved in terms of income and expenditure and reviewing that against footfall levels and marketing and promotional activity to raise awareness of the new service and location. The Taunton TIC review report confirms that income from revenue generating activities of the TIC does not cover all operating costs however intangible benefits to the Taunton Deane economy from the TIC have been stated in section 3.

- **Rent and servicing costs**

Until detailed negotiations are undertaken between Asset Management and The Brewhouse Theatre it is not clear what level of rent the TIC would be required to pay. As a result this could impact upon the overall cost of the TIC compared to current rental expenditure.

The Brewhouse have stated that depending on the type of rental agreement, it would be easier to pay a marginally higher fixed rental cost to include servicing of the TIC in terms of cleaning etc.

- **Personnel Issues (box office merger)**

At this stage the Personnel issues cannot be quantified. Dependent upon the outcome of this process and options chosen the advice of HR through Southwest One would be sought to carry out this work should some form of merger take place.

- **Hardware**

The TIC till and telephone systems needs replacing. The current till does not provide stock control capability and relocation may provide the opportunity to undertake a full review of hardware requirements.

- **Security**

Both locations within The Brewhouse have no CCTV coverage. As part of negotiations with caterers and the Youth Service the Brewhouse is reviewing security procedures to enable shared use of the building. A new CCTV system will be a part of this, and the Brewhouse would be keen to share these costs. The complete system is estimated at around £10,000. The Green Room location provides a more secure location.

- **Service Level Agreement (SLA)**

Both TDBC and the Brewhouse would require the setting up of an SLA if it was agreed that TIC would run the box office service. The SLA would define the level of service provided and set out responsibilities and priorities. It would cover issues including staffing, income and commission.

The Brewhouse have stated that the physical box office is the fount of all knowledge for their patrons, from show times to catering bookings and the main reception area for the organisation. The box office database informs and leads their programming and marketing activities, and is the engine of their business.

- **Publicity and Marketing**

Taunton TIC has been in its current location for 13 years. For users of the service, both residents and tourists, there will be a need to promote the fact that the TIC has relocated in conjunction with promoting the products and services that it would then offer. This can be achieved through PR in local media such as the Somerset County Gazette, Wellington Weekly News, BBC Radio Somerset, Heart Radio and through Parish Magazines, community newsletters, leaflets and signage at a cost.

The Publicity and marketing would cover reprints for existing tourism publications to include new address / contact details and updated / new signage both in the town centre and on routes into the town centre.

The key theme is making the users of the service aware that the high levels of professional customer service and satisfaction will be upheld. Awareness will be needed of any negative publicity created locally of the move.

7. Recommendation

It is recommended that approval given to progress further work to explore the full cost implications of relocating Taunton Tourist Information (TIC) to the Brewhouse Theatre in a phased approach:

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Appendix One - SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- One-stop ticket shop
- Potential longer opening hours for Tourist Information Centre
- PR opportunities
- If done well, could be a market leader and example to others
- Central to the new Firepool development, Somerset County Cricket Ground and Somerset Square, Bridge over River Tone to Morrisons
- Paid and fully trained, experienced staff
- TIC team can offer a multi-skilled service covering all customer needs.

Weaknesses

- Cost of relocation to TDBC
- Location not in main town centre where highest footfall occurs
- Not next to library and their 500,000 footfall
- Not under main town centre car park
- Building requires refurbishment in box office / foyer and Green room
- No storage space (box office / foyer)
- No back office space (box Office / foyer)
- Security issues – (box office / foyer)

Opportunities

- Creating Taunton's one-stop location for tickets and cultural events taking place in the area
- Would give the public a greater reason to visit the Brewhouse building and to use the Brewhouse facilities
- Green Room location would provide greater flexibility than box office area with space and a warm welcome.
- The TIC could provide a branded information stand for tourist information in the library linking in with existing work the new Taunton Park and Ride and train station.

Threats

- Current customers not using service in new location
- Loss of current business to other operators
- Library become a second TIC to fulfil enquiries made by residents and visitors who still visit the library location looking for Tourist Information.
- Conflict due to Brewhouse programming, i.e. booking of No Fit State Circus.