



**CABINET**

**21<sup>ST</sup> JANUARY 2016**

**AGENDA ITEM (9)**

**VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE GRANTS - 2016/17 TO 2018/19**

<b>Accountable Members</b>	Councillor C Hancock Cabinet Member for Enterprise and Partnerships
<b>Accountable Officer</b>	Phil Martin Joint Head of Business Information and Customer Services 01285 623114 phil.martin@cotswold.gov.uk

<b>Purpose of Report</b>	To seek approval to continue to provide financial grants totalling £54,000 to existing community providers of Visitor Information Centres (VICs) for a three-year period.
<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>That the provision of £54,000 grant funding per annum to the existing community VIC providers be approved for a three-year period.</b>
<b>Reason for Recommendation</b>	Whilst it is acknowledged that there is a move by visitors towards greater use of the Internet to research their destinations, research backed up by continued strong footfall levels show that the provision of VICs is still a valued aspect of the visitor experience, spend and stay.

<b>Wards Affected</b>	Directly affected - Bourton Vale; Bourton Village; Campden & Vale; Stow; Tetbury East & Rural; Tetbury Town; Tetbury with Upton.
<b>Key Decision</b>	Yes
<b>Recommendation to Council</b>	No

<b>Financial Implications</b>	<p>The current budget allocation provides a total annual grant amount of £54,000 - allocated for visitor information provision as follows:</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Tetbury</td> <td>£10,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Chipping Campden</td> <td>£10,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Bourton-on-the-Water</td> <td>£24,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Stow-on-the-Wold</td> <td>£10,000</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Total current budget allocation</b></td> <td><b>£54,000</b></td> </tr> </table> <p>This proposal is not requesting an increase in the current budget allocation; but that funding is provided for a three-year period - so the total commitment would be £162,000.</p> <p>In terms of costs per transactions, based on 2014/15 results, the VICs still represent good value for money at just £0.35p per visitor.</p>	Tetbury	£10,000	Chipping Campden	£10,000	Bourton-on-the-Water	£24,000	Stow-on-the-Wold	£10,000	<b>Total current budget allocation</b>	<b>£54,000</b>
Tetbury	£10,000										
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Stow-on-the-Wold	£10,000										
<b>Total current budget allocation</b>	<b>£54,000</b>										

<b>Legal and Human Rights Implications</b>	There are no Legal and Human Rights Implications
<b>Environmental and Sustainability Implications</b>	There are no Environmental and Sustainability Implications
<b>Human Resource Implications</b>	There are no Human Resource Implications
<b>Key Risk</b>	The Visitor information Centres rely heavily on grant support from both the District and Town/Parish Councils. If this funding was withdrawn, it is likely that over a short time they would close or reduce the service they offer.
<b>Equalities Impact Assessment</b>	None identified

<b>Related Decisions</b>	Cabinet - 1 <sup>st</sup> November 2012
<b>Background Documents</b>	Cabinet - 1 <sup>st</sup> November 2012 Overview and Scrutiny Call-in report - 27 <sup>th</sup> November 2012
<b>Appendices</b>	None

<b>Performance Management Follow Up</b>	The Partnership Grant Agreements (PGA) held with each VIC request monthly and quarterly data submissions which support the monitoring of the VICs over the year.
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<b>Options for Joint Working</b>	The opportunity to combine orders to enable bulk buying of products, thus enabling greater discounts and access to popular items that have a minimum order is being explored.
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<b>Background Information</b>	
<p>1. During November/December 2015, the Head of Service, Councillor Hancock and the Shared Visitor Information Centre (VIC) Officer met with representatives from each of the organisations that are providing VIC services across the District to review performance to date, understand any issues and discuss resources.</p> <p>2. At each of the meetings, the level of funding was discussed and all the organisation/individuals accepted that the Council's budgets were under significant pressure now and going forward, so there was no additional funding support on offer. However, whilst an increase in funding would have been welcomed by all, they felt that greater certainly/a longer term funding commitment was of equal value to them especially as a number had recently signed new leases for their buildings. In order to support this request, we have asked each of the organisation to provide us with a short summary, which are outlined below:</p> <p>3. <u>Chipping Campden Visitor Information Centre</u></p> <p>3.1 For many years the commission on accommodation bookings kept the VIC afloat and when the current Committee took on running the VIC five or so years ago, this income had drastically declined to such an extent that, it was operating at a considerable loss and owed at least twelve months' rent.</p>	

3.2 Although it has taken time, the Committee has managed to overcome the challenging National financial crisis and establish a relatively stable financial situation. At the time, key elements in this were obtaining an additional £5,000 in grant aid from the Council, an additional £1,000 grant from the Town Council, reducing staff costs and working at identifying new income streams/products that would each net between £1,000 and £2,000.

3.3 We are about to enter into a new annual rental agreement with the Peelers Trust - in January 2016, which has six months' notice required (notice must be given by 30th June to exit agreement at 31<sup>st</sup> December) and in-built three to five year rental reviews. The last one in 2012 was £500 and it is anticipated that the next one is likely to be of order of £700.

3.4 Whilst today it does not face the then "critical" day-to-day crisis of those days, the situation is very finely balanced and new pressures appear to keep us on our toes.

3.5 Make no mistake about it, without those additional grants at the time, the VIC would have had to close and, unless the economic situation significantly improves again, the loss of these grants would probably mean almost instant closure.

#### 4. Stow-on-the-Wold Visitor Information Centre

4.1 Stow-on-the-Wold Town Council, together with the businesses in the town and surrounding area (including shops, restaurants and accommodation providers), are committed to finding a solution that will give us a successful and sustainable VIC, which we all believe is absolutely fundamental to continue to attract tourists to the town.

4.2 We have struggled with finding a solution that is sustainable until this year, when the library service and Gloucestershire County Council have agreed to work with us to provide the service. Even though we have only been up and running since May (which has presented a steep learning curve for all), the first year has been a huge success, beyond any or our expectations, I think - both in terms of the increased number of visitors, and the feedback received by the library staff themselves. For all parties involved in this project, we very much see this as a process of continual development and improvement, and, as you know, the library service is already planning extended opening hours for next summer. We, as a Town Council, now have a three to five year strategic plan in place, and the continual improvement of visitor services to encourage tourism is a fundamental part of that. What Stow wants and needs in terms of VIC provision right now is continuity and sustainability. It is very difficult for any of us to plan ahead and be ambitious if we are constantly working on a short term basis, with uncertainty every Christmas as to whether the VIC will be funded for another year.

4.3 The Town Council is currently working on a series of initiatives which work in parallel to and complement the services of the VIC; all aimed at attracting more visitors to stow and engaging more effectively with visitors, residents and businesses alike. These include:-

- we have taken over the running and funding of the website which was used by the previous VIC as both a community website and an information website for visitors. We have an external consultant who is in the process (at our expense) of continually populating and improving that website and managing our social media, particularly for events, which he is doing very successfully;
- as a council we are starting to organise a series of events (including a very successful firework display on bonfire night, and a Christmas event and lights switch on when Cadbury's came to town!). These are all backed, financially by STC, and are for the benefit of residents, businesses and visitors. We will be forming an events committee in the New Year to continue and build on the events that we hold in the town;
- we are also committed to encourage and lead the re-formation of a business association or chamber of commerce in the town, so that businesses, events and the VIC can be better co-ordinated.

4.4 Both the Town Council and the Library service would welcome a three-year commitment, so that we can ourselves put in place a three-year plan for improvements to the service, with each year building on the achievements of the previous year. This will also assist in the Town Council's applications for the new quality status accreditation.

#### 5. Tetbury Visitor Information Centre

5.1 Tetbury Town Council now has a five-year business plan in place and to secure longer term commitment from the Council would enable it to have a longer term commitment to tourism in the town. Currently the Town Council funds more than 50% of the running of the VIC in Tetbury.

5.2 In the coming months, many Town and Parish Councils will be applying for the new Town and Parish Council quality status which was launched this year. In order to achieve this, we need to demonstrate commitment to community engagement and action planning including budget commitment/plans. Our plans include a new Web Site design and additional staff to engage with businesses and shops with the aim of bringing together a more co-ordinated event plan.

5.3 For Tetbury having the security of three years would mean that we could establish some good links with the community to improve our event organising which needs to be planned for at least twelve months in advance. This will help increase our capacity with the objective of increasing visitor numbers and spend in the town.

#### 6. Bourton-on-the-Water Visitor Information Centre

6.1 The Bourton-on-the-Water VIC was taken over by Bourton Vic Ltd; which was a company set up specifically to operate the service ten years ago, following negotiations with the Council that were facilitated by Bourton Chamber of Commerce. The company has three Directors who are voluntary and bear the financial risk of running the company. It employs three of the original staff to help maintain a professional operation, who are assisted by a small "army" of some fifteen volunteers.

6.2 In 2006, the VIC was closed down as part of an overall change in Council strategy regarding VICs, which moved away from Council-run VICs to an approach where local organisation would be grant aid to provide visitor information services. The current grant from the Council is £24,000 p.a. for providing similar services, which used to cost approx. £80,000 p.a. so it could be argued that this does represent very good value for money to the Council. Out of the grant the company then pays £7,350 p.a. back to the Council for the rental of the premises, effectively reducing the net grant to £16,650 p.a.

6.3 The Parish Council does provide some financial assistance to the VIC, but this is usually specific for one-off projects and activities, not the general day-to-day running costs. However, for the last two years, the company has successfully solicited a grant of £1,000 to assist with day-to-day running costs.

6.4 The VIC actively pursues income generating ideas and opportunities to cover its running costs and raises approx. £30,000 p.a. of revenue to support the service. In the Summer the VIC is open seven days a week, which exceeds its agreement that only requires six, and, in the Winter, it is still open on six days a week from 9.30 a.m. to 4.00 p.m.

6.5 The footfall is 75,000+ p.a., as well as e-mails, letters and phone calls, which equates to the VIC dealing with one customer every 90 seconds throughout the year. The Visit England Strategic Framework for Tourism 2010-2020 recognises this achievement and features Bourton VIC as a case study to illustrate how essential local services can be successfully provided by collaboration between private and public enterprises like the Council.

6.6 Despite all the hard work and commitment of the volunteers and Committee, without the funding from the Council the VIC would have to close, which would be a major loss to the local community and businesses that it helps to support and promote.

6.7 The 'Committee' has recently re-signed a three-year lease with the Council which owns the building and therefore would greatly appreciate a longer term funding commitment going forward as this would significantly help the overall planning of the VIC and help with negotiating future leases etc.

7. General information and Statistics

7.1 Approximately 3.7m day visitors come to the District each year, supporting our local economy, both directly and indirectly, and helping to sustain just under 6,000 jobs in the District. In 2014, three of the grant-aided VIC services (Bourton-on-the-Water, Chipping Campden and Tetbury) supported over 125,000 visitors as follows:-

<b>VIC</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015*</b>
Bourton-on-the-Water	82517	79421	78043	77181	69224
Chipping Campden	27562	29991	31496	32463	28459
Tetbury	17514	15642	15277	15437	12211
Stow-on-the Wold	Not collected				40171

7.2 It is interesting to note that, even in an Internet world, 35% of visitors call into VICs, making them the No. 1 source of information during their trips and a vital part of the overall visitor experience (Axenford Research).

\* Note - the 2015 figures are between April and November 2015.

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