



Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	CABINET – 6 DECEMBER 2021
Report Number	AGENDA ITEM 08
Subject	REVIEW OF GRANT FUNDING & SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS FOR EXISTING GRANT MAINTAINED VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRES
Wards affected	Directly - Bourton on the Water Village, Chipping Campden & Vale, Stow on the Wold, Tetbury Town council, Tetbury Upton. (Location of facilities) Indirectly - All - a wider tourism reach
Accountable member	Councillor Tony Dale – Cabinet member for the Economy & Council transformation Email: tony.dale@cotswold.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Chris Jackson - Shared Tourism Services Manager Email: Chris.Jackson@publicagroup.uk
Summary/Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● To review the work and impact of the grant maintained Visitor Information Centres across the District.● To understand the role they play in supporting businesses in the local Visitor Economy & how this could be improved in future.● To understand the impact of the Covid pandemic on the Centres & visitor journey with a focus on digital engagement.● To consider the future direction for Visitor Information Centres & how they can help support the Council's tourism priorities.
Annexes	Annex A – Update on review of VIC work from 2018/2019 review Annex B - Finance & visitor number spreadsheet Annex C - Proposals from each VIC on supporting key Council & tourism priorities in the future
Recommendation(s)	<i>To seek approval to continue to provide financial grants at current levels to the four existing grant maintained Visitor Information Centres for an 18 month period. Total financial commitment of £81 000 (1/4/22 – 30/9/23).</i> <i>To use the 18 month period as an opportunity to baseline and work with the current Centres to trial a change to a criteria-based commissioned grant system with key objectives relevant to the town/village & helping</i>



	<p><i>towards the Council & Cotswolds Tourism objectives.</i></p> <p><i>Have a longer term aim to shift Visitor Information Centre provision to being proactive, digitally enabled and working to improve the visitor economy of the local town/village and surrounding area.</i></p>
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Delivering our services to the highest standards● Responding to the challenges presented by the climate crisis● Supporting businesses to grow in a green, sustainable manner, and to provide high value jobs
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	<p>Consultation has taken place with Bourton Visitor Information Centre Ltd, Chipping Campden Visitor Information Centre (CEE Ltd) Tetbury Visitor Information Centre, Stow Visitor Information Centre, Tetbury Town Council, Stow Town Council, Gloucestershire Library Service, Bourton Parish Council, Chipping Campden Town Council Local Ward Councillors</p>



I. BACKGROUND

- I.1 Historically, the District Council (“the Council”) has provided annual Visitor Information Centre grant support to Centres in Bourton on the Water, Chipping Campden, Stow on the Wold and Tetbury, in support of enabling visitors to those places to access visitor information on local and wider Cotswolds information. Grants have remained at the same levels since 1 April 2009 and moved to a three year model in 2016 having previously been annual agreements.

The Council currently supports four community-operated Visitor Information Centres (“VICs”) :

- Bourton on the Water £24k
- Chipping Campden £10k
- Stow on the Wold £10k
- Tetbury £10k

- I.2 Following the recent Council review of the work of the shared Tourism Service, responsibility for the VICs has passed back to the shared Tourism Service. The current three year VIC grants are due for renewal 31st March 2022 with a decision needed to be communicated by 31st January 2022.
- I.3 For clarification the shared Tourism Service is a small joint tourism team across West Oxfordshire and Cotswold District Councils. Activity is focussed on the wider visitor economy and supporting businesses to make the best of opportunities associated with visitor spend. The joint tourism team also lead Cotswolds Tourism which is the official Destination Management Organisation (DMO) for promoting and marketing tourism across the wider Cotswolds region that liaises with the British Tourism Association via VisitBritain and VisitEngland which in turn liaises with government via the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS). A public-private sector organisation, Cotswolds Tourism is a partnership of tourism businesses, supported by local authorities. Hosted in Cotswold District Council, Cotswolds Tourism is supported with resources by West Oxfordshire District Council, Cotswold District Council and includes strategic partners of Cotswolds National Landscape, Cheltenham Borough Council & Marketing Cheltenham, Tewkesbury Borough Council, and Stroud District Council.
- I.4 The Council has corporate priority of delivering services to the highest standards and supporting businesses to grow in a green, sustainable manner, and to provide high value jobs. Furthermore, for Cotswold District, tourism is a key sector of the local economy accounting for 17% of jobs.
- I.5 The grant review undertaken in December 2018 and October 2021 both concluded that it is more cost effective for the Council to operate a VIC via a third party than operating it directly itself.



- 1.6 The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been severe. With the first lockdown in March 2020, the Visitor Economy came to an almost complete halt and key parts of the main holiday seasons were lost in both 2020 and again in 2021. The VICs across the District were closed for much of this time. Overseas visitors, who tend to be proportionally the highest users of VIC services, are not predicted to return fully to 2019 levels until 2024/25. The pandemic has disrupted VIC plans and significantly affected their income.
 - 1.7 The previous Council review work of the shared Tourism Service highlighted the impact of Covid-19 and the rapid move to digital on-line services which support the requirements for pre-arrival booking and pre-planning. There has also been an associated dramatic reduction in the production of printed publications and guides and default to online digital versions. There are consequences for traditional VIC face-to-face services in that their business model and much of their offer has been badly impacted by Covid-19 and overtaken by events in terms of the move to digital solutions.
 - 1.8 It should be noted for the context of this report that visitor information services are also provided through the Corinium Museum via contract arrangements with SLM, which run until 31 July 2023. Local information is provided via Moreton Area Centre. Local community information points are also provided by Cirencester Town Council and at Lechlade Community Library.
 - 1.9 In the last three year grant agreement review each VIC had highlighted how it would explore innovative ways to increase its income, sell local merchandise and engage and promote local small businesses.
 - 1.10 Discussions with representatives from each VIC have highlighted that the Centres are seen as a valued support for their local economy and for that reason most receive grants from their relevant Town or Parish Council.
 - 1.11 Regionally and nationally, the pandemic has seen the permanent closure of many VICs including Burford & Witney, as well as Oxford and Bath.
 - 1.12 Local businesses have adapted during the pandemic to offer online booking, enhance their social media presence and websites reducing the need for leaflets. This trend is likely to continue and increase.
- 2. MAIN POINTS - Review of past and current service provision**
- 2.1. Update review meetings were held with each of the VICs & relevant partners to the SLA agreements in Autumn 2021 to understand how they delivered VIC services, including the challenges and opportunities during the last three years. Each VIC updated on actions taken



or postponed due to the pandemic from the last review meetings held in 2018 – see Annex A which gives a summary of these meetings. The overall view was that each location operated differently but all were only providing reactive visitor provision to lower visitor numbers.

- 2.2. The reviews found significant variations across the four grant funded VICs: the levels of support and involvement from the local Town or Parish Council; the engagement with local businesses, event organisers and the resident community; the online presence and engagement with visitors via local websites and social media channels.
- 2.3. Visitor numbers, income and expenditure were also reviewed, highlighting similarities for outgoings on physical premises, differences on income, footfall and alternative delivery partners. See Annex B which highlights the headline figures and the current reliance of each VIC on Council grant funding. If this grant funding was withdrawn it is likely that over a short time they would close or reduce the service they offer, substantially placing additional strain on the shared Tourism Service team.
- 2.4. VIC understanding of the needs of its visitor community is poorly documented. For instance there was no clear data from where visitors were coming from.
- 2.5. Anecdotal information highlighted local VIC staff, including volunteer staff, are knowledgeable, local ambassadors of the local places they represent playing a key role in promoting local businesses, events, retail and ticket sales answering a wide range of enquiries via email, phone and face to face.
- 2.6. Town Councils that are investing in their local VIC felt the service to be key to continue to invest in but saw opportunities to build more community and business involvement to see them as local hubs.
- 2.7. The pandemic has accelerated the drive to digital both from a consumer perspective but also the need for businesses to manage visitor flow. In reviewing the town's social media promotional and presence it is clear that the VICs have been playing a limited role in recent years. The VICs also recognise the need to reach visitors while planning their visit and could play a vital role in influencing visitor behaviour. Social media now plays a big part in the consumer journey including before booking, and this is a potential gap that could be better exploited to help drive visitors to book experiences and visit less well known places in the area. Knowledge on digital promotion would need to be improved.
- 2.8. In reviewing the past and current Service Level Agreements, it is felt that a more robust Service Agreement with the VICs could help the shared tourism service in delivering some key engagement with visitors digitally, promoting local events and ensuring better



- 2.9. communication with businesses in the local economy. It was also noted that, in the past, the Centres have had a shorter grant period of one year as well as more recently the three year grant period.
- 2.10. The changing landscape of enhancement to digital provision, means fewer brochures are now produced by Cotswolds Tourism DMO and the local attractions, meaning some of the VICs now have less need for leaflet racking within their premises.
- 2.11. **MAIN POINTS - Future provision & way forward**
- 2.12. Each local VIC was asked to submit ideas of how they can support the key tourism priorities and actions in the destination management plan for Cotswolds Tourism DMO which is currently being refreshed. Following adoption of the plan it is expected to include a focus on accessibility and sustainability so the VICs were also asked to highlight ideas for their local area on future opportunities they could help promote and work in supporting the shared tourism team. See Annex C which highlights the responses from each of the four Visitor Centres.
- 2.13. Essentially each VIC has, in the past, just been reactive to visitors. The shared tourism service is keen to work with each VIC and town to become more proactive in their approach to help influence visitors, businesses and local residents and maximise local opportunities. By moving to a proactive approach it is felt this could improve the visitor economy of the town/village and surrounding local area.
- 2.14. The VIC's footfall is lower and still recovering from the pandemic. It may be that it will not recover to past levels. This presents an opportunity to trial something new for a short period, while maintaining the physical VIC and considering future options. It would also allow the shared tourism team to work closely with each town better to understand who is using the VICs, look at alternative options and allow the VICs time to put into action the original plans.
- 2.15. There is a clear training requirement for the VIC staff to have confidence to engage and promote via social media platforms. During Spring 2022 this could be provided with an expectation for each VIC to help the tourism team showcase more local events, businesses and sustainable visitor ideas to visitors and locals via digital platforms.
- 2.16. Each local VIC was asked to consider ways longer term that they could operate differently to save expenditure such as using volunteers, (as many already do) co-locating for premises or to drive revenue. By having an 18 month period this will ensure each location has time



fully to review its own options and look to address key visitor economy issues specific to each location.

- 2.17. Each local VIC can work with the shared tourism service to gather better data within the year period to ensure a better understanding of the requirements of visitors, residents and businesses from a local information centre. This information can also be gathered for other local information centres who currently operate without a grant to share best practices and look to consider future models.
- 2.18. As referred to in 1.8 above, as the SLM contract for Cirencester VIC at Corinium Museum ends in July 2023, it would make sense to bring all VIC provision into a similar timeframe.
- 2.19. Visitor behaviour had to change with the pandemic and visitors have become accustomed to information being provided in alternative ways. People are increasingly self-serving via phone apps, QR codes and websites but these do take time to set up. For physical leaflets such as maps, town information or walking routes these could be purchased or picked up from a variety of outlets.
- 2.20. With the changing landscape of the visitor journey it is vital that all digital social media engagement is monitored & responded to, addressing issues as they arise and maintaining a good quality visitor experience. Local VICs are the knowledgeable local ambassadors of the local town/village so can play a vital role in answering visitor's queries and comments via platforms such as Tripadvisor, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter as well as promoting local events and things to do. The review found that currently this is very limited.
- 2.21. As part of the government's plan via DCMS to support the tourism industry recovery from the pandemic, the [National Tourism Recovery Plan](#) has been launched. Cotswolds Tourism DMO is currently revising the Destination Management Plan for the Cotswolds and both of these documents have a focus on sustainability and accessibility as two core areas of focus for tourism. The four local grant maintained VICs will be expected during this new grant period to support the shared tourism team by liaising with local businesses, researching local information and considering new ideas that support tourism locally.
- 2.22. The Council needs to ensure value for money and, with the uncertainty the pandemic has caused to the tourism industry, an 18 month approach allows for open communications with Town & Parish Councils which rely on tourism, to work with the shared tourism service on potentially establishing a future grant scheme that is criteria based to support the visitor economy across the District. A further Cabinet report on options longer term can then be put forward in Summer 2023.



3. CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1.** Each Centre has operating models that have become heavily reliant on Council grants and each of them has a distinct reactive way of operating. The VICs are a source of local information with knowledgeable staff and volunteers who take pride in their local area and the wider Cotswolds. If this grant funding was withdrawn it is likely that, over a short time, they would close or reduce the service they offer substantially placing additional strain on the shared Tourism Service team.
- 3.2.** With many areas already closing VICs, it was felt a better approach would be to see how the Centres can adapt to being proactive and digitally enabled over the next 18 months, bearing in mind the Cotswolds traditional visitor and larger number of overseas visitors the current locations support.
- 3.3.** The current VIC grant is not equitable to all visitor locations across the District. Time is required to set up and gather survey information to consider if and how it could be changed to best suit future needs as visitors, businesses and locals engage in a digital world. Having an 18 month grant funding period continuing at the current levels for each location would act as a pilot period to bring forward alternatives for a future criteria-based commission grant system. It will allow a firm base line to be established and enable a wider engagement with Town and Parish Councils in key tourist locations on appropriate future provision. Furthermore, it is considered having an 18 month grant via an individual Service Level Agreement approach, with clear outcomes for each location, linked to each town/village objectives, tourism priorities for the Cotswolds destination DMO and aims of the Council would ensure a better service overall.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1** No direct financial implications at this stage as grant support provided to VICs is to continue at the current budgeted level of £54,000 per year for the next 18 months (£81,000 in total).

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1** Under the terms of the Agreements with the various VICS, the notification of the outcome of the review must be made known to them no later than 31 January 2022.
- 5.2** Save than the above there are no other legal implications arising directly from this Report.

6. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 6.1** The risks of a Centre failing are mitigated by clear performance metrics aligned to the Council's priorities and the evidenced needs of the Visitor Economy.



7. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 7.1 The recommendation does not involve a new policy or requirement for an EIA.

8. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 Recommendations support the aim of the Council climate actions by encouraging the drive to a digital focus for the visitor economy.

9. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 The following documents have been identified by the author of the report in accordance with section 100D.5(a) of the Local Government Act 1972 and are listed in accordance with section 100 D.1(a) for inspection by members of the public:

Annex A, B, C

Previous Council reports of :

Visitor Information centres 2019-2022 & Tourism Review April 2021

These documents will be available for inspection at the Council Offices at Trinity Road, Cirencester, GL7 1PX during normal office hours for a period of up to 4 years from the date of the meeting. Please contact democratic services via democratic@cotswold.gov.uk

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