



COTSWOLD
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	Cabinet - 17 July 2023
Subject	Review future support for grant-maintained Visitor Information Centres
Wards affected	Directly - Bourton Village, Bourton Vale, Campden & Vale, Stow, Tetbury Town, Tetbury Upton, Tetbury East & Rural. (Location of facilities) Indirectly - All - a wider tourism reach
Accountable member	Cllr Tony Dale – Cabinet Member for Economy and Council Transformation Email: Tony.Dale@cotswold.gov.uk
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Summary/Purpose	To consider future support for existing grant-aided Visitor Information Centres (VICs).
Annexes	Annex – VIC footfall
Recommendation(s)	<i>That Cabinet resolves to:</i> <i>1. Agree forward funding from the unallocated balance of the Bourton Tourism Levy of £6,000 for a transitional period to the end of December 2023 for costs associated with Bourton on the Water VIC running the coach booking system.</i>
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver the highest standard of service



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Respond to the climate crisis• Enable a vibrant economy
Key Decision	No
Exempt	No
Consultees/ Consultation	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 and Local Ward Councillors.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. A report to Cabinet in December 2021 agreed a review of Visitor Information Centres (VICs) and grant funding was extended for an 18 month period which ends at the end of September 2023.
- 1.2. Since the pandemic there have been significant changes in the way that visitors access information and increasing budgetary pressures on the Council.
- 1.3. This report recommends that when the extension period ends, Bourton on the Water VIC receives £6,000 in transitional funding in recognition of the VIC's role in managing coach parking in the village.

2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1. Historically, the District Council ("the Council") provided annual Visitor Information Centre grant support to centres in Bourton on the Water, Chipping Campden, Stow on the Wold and Tetbury. The grants were annual amounts of:
 - Bourton on the Water £24,000
 - Chipping Campden £10,000
 - Stow on the Wold £10,000
 - Tetbury £10,000
- 2.2. Grants have remained at the same level since 1 April 2009 and were last reviewed in December 2021, when the Council agreed to continue to grant-fund the VICs for a further 18 month period. No funding was put in place for this financial year beyond the 30th September 2023.
- 2.3. The funding extension was subject to updated Service Level Agreements (SLAs) which highlighted the need to move from reactive information provision to proactive partnership with local businesses and moving towards self-sufficient delivery models, capitalising on opportunities presented by a digital approach.
- 2.4. Each VIC was asked to consider ways they could operate differently to cut expenditure, such as using volunteers or co-locating premises, and to increase revenue.
- 2.5. The VICs are all very different and engagement varies significantly: 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; and the amount of collaboration with Cotswolds Tourism.
- 2.6. The 2021 review suggested that the Cotswolds Tourism team might trial a criteria-based commission grant system, however this has not proved feasible. It is difficult to benchmark

each information centre with their very different situations, set ups and local priorities; and, notably, many other towns already provide visitor information provision with no grant from the council.

- 2.7. The last few years have seen major changes in visitor and business behaviour, many of which are set to be permanent. The increasing importance of digital information provision via both websites and increasingly social media was apparent before Covid. However, the pandemic turbocharged the move to digital with visitors needing up to the minute information, businesses instigating booking systems and pre-booking becoming the norm. Prior to the pandemic most visitors accessed information online pre-visit, not once they were in-destination. In 2019, Cotswolds.com saw 47% of visitors accessing the website via mobiles, 53% by desktop/tablet; in 2020, 61% were using mobiles. Post-pandemic these figures have hardly changed (2023: 61% mobile). Visitor numbers to the Cotswolds.com website increased 27% from 2019 to 2022 (1.2m to 1.5m unique visitors) and social media followers grew 53% (from 91,227 to 139,799).
- 2.8. At the same time, footfall to VICs has continued to fall - a continuation of a longer term trend seen nationally across VICs. In 2022, combined visitor numbers to the four VICs were 30% lower than 2019. See Annex for more information.

VIC	2019/2020 visitors (pre pandemic)	2022 visitors	Change	Comments
Bourton on the Water	67,172	52,191	22% down	
Chipping Campden	29,608	15,319	48% down	Overseas visitors not recovered
Stow on the Wold	62,675*	44,848*	29% down	*Combined library/visitors footfall
Tetbury	12,855	8,792	32% down	

- 2.9. A further relevant change, driven both by the move to digital and by the growing importance of environmental concerns, has been the reduction in printed leaflets. Many attractions have stopped printing hard copy leaflets and almost all have reduced their print runs. Browsing and 'picking up a few leaflets' was a key motivator for visiting VICs.
- 2.10. Regionally and nationally, the pandemic saw the permanent closure of many VICs including Burford and Witney, as well as Oxford and Bath. Locally, the award-winning information

centre in Gloucester has been downgraded to an information point and other VICs are under review. Many towns in the wider Cotswolds area operate visitor information points (Lechlade, Dursley, Painswick, Cirencester Town Council) with no grant funding from the district councils.

- 2.11. Changes to visitor behaviour mean there is no longer the absolute requirement of a face to face service and alternative options are available to access information whilst in the destination as well as pre-plan and pre-book visits.
- 2.12. While the majority of visitors no longer rely on VICs, there is no doubt that some visitors enjoy the face to face contact, the in-depth knowledge and insights that VIC staff provide on the local area and appreciate a map of the town/village, staff acting as local ambassadors and helping enhance the overall visitor experience.
- 2.13. If VICs are to have a future, it is as specialised local information points, offering something unique that cannot easily be found online. This is likely to be the really in-depth local knowledge of the local residents that live and work there.
- 2.14. When the current grant funding ends at the end of September 2023, the Council will no longer provide any funding for VICs.

3. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 3.1. The Council looks to make available transitional funding to all four of the VICs, though savings from other service budgets would need to be identified for this, or reserve funding used.

4. CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1. The Council has to make strategic decisions around budget allocation and prioritise focus on measures that have a district wide benefit. Visitor information centres offer a local service popular with their business community, however it is increasingly hard to justify the expenditure given budgetary pressure and the localised nature of the service, especially given the ongoing move to digital and decreasing footfall.
- 4.2. It is proposed that Bourton VIC receives £6,000 in transitional financial support in recognition of their role in managing coach parking and the larger drop in grant funding.
- 4.3. It is proposed that non-financial, transitional, strategic support is offered to all four towns until the end of December 2023 by the council's economic development lead, working closely with the local town and parish councils alongside input from the tourism team. The purpose of the support is to work alongside the VICs towards a self-sustaining business model and provide signposting to known funding opportunities for projects which facilitate digital engagement. This could include connecting to business support or training and

potential opportunities to bid for relevant funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund or Rural England Prosperity Fund to support sustainable future delivery models.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. The 2023/24 General Fund revenue budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy approved by Council in February 2023 only provided funding for the Visitor Information Centres for the first half of the financial year. Therefore, funding for the VICs will end on 30th September 2023 with no provision within the budget to extend financial support beyond that date. If the Council wished to continue to fund the VICs it would need to reduce costs and find savings from other service budgets.
- 5.2. The recommendation included within this report is for the Council to allocate £6,000 from the unallocated balance of the 2022/2023 Bourton Tourism Levy.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. Under the terms of the agreements with the various Visitor Information Centres, the notification of the outcome of the review must be made known to them no later than 31 July 2023.

7. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 7.1. If the Visitor Information Centres do not secure alternative funding or use a different operating model, such as volunteers to support their running, there is a risk of the VICs having to close or limit opening hours.
- 7.2. The centres will not be subject to any service level agreement and as a result direct visitor enquiries, currently dealt with by the VIC staff, may be redirected to the Council's tourism team.
- 7.3. There may potentially be dissatisfaction among local businesses should the information centres close especially if properties were to remain empty.
- 7.4. Bourton on the Water VIC is located in a council building for which rent is paid to Cotswold District Council. Should the VIC leave and the building remains unoccupied there would be a loss of income of approx £8,000 annually.

8. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 8.1. There could be an impact on the older demographic visiting the region, most of whom are able to access information online but who have a preference for face to face contact. It does not prevent those visitors from visiting these locations as information is available online, local tour guides often brief visitors being dropped off in locations and local businesses often help direct people.

- 8.2. There are now dedicated specialist information sites for visitors with specific disabilities that signpost those businesses that have facilities. There is also a national focus for accessibility and inclusion via VisitEngland that the new Cotswolds Plus Local Visitor Economy Partnership will be looking to align to in the longer term.

9. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

The move away from paper-based visitor information by encouraging a drive to a digital focus for the whole district's visitor economy supports the Council's action on climate change.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

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:

Previous council reports of:

- 10.1. Review of grant funding & service level agreements for the grant maintained Visitor Information Centre December 2021.
- 10.2. Tourism review 2021.
- 10.3. These documents will be available for inspection online at www.cotswold.gov.uk or by contacting democratic services democratic@cotswold.gov.uk for a period of up to 4 years from the date of the meeting.

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