

# Report to Economic Growth Scrutiny Panel

Agenda  
Item:

**A.4**

Meeting Date: 19 October 2017  
Portfolio: Culture, Heritage and Leisure  
Key Decision: Not Applicable:  
Within Policy and Budget Framework NO  
Public / Private Public

Title: UPDATE ON THE TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE AND COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY  
Report of: The Deputy Chief Executive  
Report Number: CS 37/17

## Purpose / Summary:

This report updates the Members of the Health & Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel with regards to the operation of the Tourist Information Centre and Assembly Room.

## Recommendations:

That members note the content of the report.

## Tracking

Executive:	N/A
Overview and Scrutiny:	19 <sup>th</sup> October 2017
Council:	N/A

## **1.0 BACKGROUND**

- 1.1** The Tourist Information Centre (TIC), based in the Old Town Hall, acts as a gateway to Carlisle's Historic and Cultural attractions. The TIC plays an important role in orientating visitors and showcasing Carlisle and the wider area including Hadrian's Wall, the Lake District and South West Scotland. The TIC has a gift shop which stocks a range of souvenirs, many of which are locally produced. The Old Town Hall also includes the Assembly Room, both the TIC and Assembly Rooms were redeveloped in 2015 to modernise their service appeal and to open up the Assembly Rooms for meetings, events and weddings.

## **2. TIC CURRENT SERVICE OUTPUTS**

### **2.1 Range of Service**

#### **2.1.1 Information**

Providing an information service remains our principle function. We maintain a high level of literature and brochures for the county and wider area. We are required more than ever to use the internet to search for information as the availability of literature is reducing. Many attractions and region are becoming entirely web based. Following this trend we have seen a marked decrease in the amount of literature being collected by tourists. The exception to this being maps -we give out hundreds of Carlisle City centre and Hadrian's Wall map daily. We have noticed a growth in the number of local users of the service and are frequently engaged in non-tourism related enquiries.

#### **2.1.2 Accommodation**

The TIC offers an accommodation booking service as part of our core service. We charge a £4 search fee to those looking for accommodation, but no longer charge a commission to the establishments. The amount of bookings we make per year has been steadily decreasing over a long period of time due to fundamental changes in the market place and the growth in online self-service booking options. This is a common theme in TIC across the country as our client needs are changing.

So, to align ourselves with our customer needs, to widen our scope and to increase the usage of our accommodation service we have recently become agents for Bookings.com. This enables us to make bookings online all over the country and receive commission from Bookings.com. We are also still able to charge the £4 search fee. This has widened our range of available accommodation and means we

are now able to book accommodation all over the country for both residents of Carlisle and Visitors. Crucially it also allows us to remain relevant in a modern market place and provide a useful service to visitor and residents.

### **2.1.3 Ticket sales**

Ticket sales for local events make up a significant part of our income generation. As at the end of August 2017 we had sold over £43,000 (face value) worth of tickets against a target of £33,779 for the same period.

We retain between 5% and 10% on these total sales as a profit margin depending on the organisation and event we are selling for. Our commission retention rates being 5% for charitable events and organisations and 10% for commercial ones.

As this has proven to be a successful and growing income stream for the TIC we are continuing to look to reach new arrangements with third parties to sell their tickets.

The Tourist Information Centre currently sells tickets for events at the Cathedral, major third-party events across Carlisle as well as providing a regular service for the Old Fire Station, The Green Room and Carlisle Angling Association. By broadening the range of venues for which we sell tickets we are also introducing a new audience to the facilities of the Old Town Hall and benefitting from secondary spend.

### **2.1.4 Retail**

As part of the refurbishment of the Old Town Hall the retail space in the TIC was reduced. This has resulted in a more focused offer in terms of the souvenir and gifts that we stock. Increased interest in local produce has seen a shift away from the standard souvenirs to more speciality products such as jewellery and craft beers.

However, traditional souvenirs such as postcards and magnets remain our best sellers, with high volume sales consistent with the number of day visitors we receive. Despite lower margins, confectionary and alcohol are also high sellers so contribute to our income.

## **2.2 Retail Performance**

We aim for a mark-up of 35-40% on stock items. Many of our local products are stocked on a sale or return basis, in smaller quantities, reducing the risk to the City Council of holding stock. As of the end of August 2017 we have spent approx.

£12,000 on stock with total sales being in the region of £16,000. This is consistent with our aims in terms of mark-up.

## **2.3 Visitor Figures**

Visitor numbers to the TIC have increased by approximately 20% for the period Jan to Aug 2017 with a marked growth over the peak season (Apr-Aug). For the period Jan – Aug 2017 we have welcomed 57,691 visitors. For the same period in 2016 we had 47,736 visitors. The largest growth has been from local and domestic (UK) visitors. There has been a decrease in the number of international visitors overall but there has been an increase in visitors from the USA, Australia and Asian Countries specifically

The popularity of Hadrian's Wall has been steadily building and in 2017 we have experienced a marked increase in enquiries especially at the start of the summer.

## **2.4 Assembly Room**

The Assembly room income has been growing steadily over the past few of years. We have succeeded in passing our income target to date this year as we have taken over £3900 so far against a target of £3,050. Although the income brought into the Assembly room has increased and we are exceeding target, the room is still under used. We are averaging 7 bookings a month which means there is plenty of scope for increasing occupancy. We are starting to see a return of regular users, such as Northern Crafts and Carlisle Yoga and we are aiming to build on these relationships. Equally we will engage in the coming months with Carlisle Ambassadors and other stakeholder groups to promote the venue.

# **3. DISCOVER CARLISLE CURRENT SERVICE OUTPUTS**

## **3.1 Discover Carlisle Website**

The Discover Carlisle website is currently being re-developed and production has been brought in-house. The current website, which is managed externally, is due to be decommissioned at the end of November.

In 2016 the website had 195,000 users, 85% new with 14% repeat. The majority of users were UK based, with the next largest group being from the USA. The single largest group was from Carlisle itself. This is something that the new site aims to address, by more effectively promoting Carlisle to a regional national and international audience.

In the first half of 2017 our users totalled 124,000 with 88% new and 11% returning. We have had an increase in users from people in Edinburgh which we have put down to our Fringe event.

### **3.2 Social Media**

Discover Carlisle currently uses Facebook and Twitter. We have 2371 'likes' on Facebook, the majority of which are based in Carlisle or Cumbria. Due to this breakdown, we use this platform to promote locals interest events and stories. On Twitter we have 3841 followers, 95% are UK based. The most popular posts on social media have related to key events in the city - Bryan Adams, Little Mix etc.

The TIC uses Twitter to promote our services and events. We have 2291 followers and this has been steadily growing over the last few months. We aim to vary the content on the TIC and Discover Carlisle Twitter accounts to have a different voice.

### **3.3 Literature**

The Discover Carlisle Holiday guide 2017 was published in February. It followed a similar format to previous years, outlining things to see and do in the city and wider area, shopping, eating out and accommodation. Fewer accommodation providers are now listed in the guide as most are operating online and through agents such as Bookings.com. Distribution of the guide was handled by Northern Print Distribution (NPD) and a total of 40,000 were produced. The guide was distributed to Cumbria (excluding Carlisle), Lancashire, the North East, Southern Scotland & Yorkshire. The guide was also made available at the TIC and at key access points to the city.

Digital distribution of the holiday guide was provided by Catalink and we have received 12,000 email addresses to use for marketing purposes. Catalink targeted the areas listed below for digital distribution

- Southern Scotland
- Northumberland
- South Cumbria/The Lake District
- Lancashire
- Derbyshire
- Cheshire
- Yorkshire

We have produced two seasonal events guides – Summer 2017 published in May and Winter 2017 published in October. Distribution of both event guides was handled by NPD. The summer guide had a print run of 20,000 copies and the winter had 10,000 copies. The guide was distributed to Cumbria, Lancashire, the North

East, Southern Scotland & North Yorkshire. The guide was also made available at the TIC.

For 2018 we are aiming to reduce our literature by producing two seasonal guides which will combine the holiday guide and events listing. The emphasis moving forward will be on our web presence with the launch of our new site.

We have renewed the city centre map which is available from the TIC. Along with a focus on a smaller area, the new map has advertising space on the reverse. We are currently seeking possible options to maximise this opportunity and off-set the cost of production.

## **4. FUTURE SERVICE**

### **4.1 Tourism service**

As previously stated accommodation booking approaches and the tourism market place has shifted fundamentally over the last decade. The majority of accommodation bookings are now made on line and increasingly visitors are looking to the same platform for information about a destination and things to see and do. Carlisle's TIC has been evolving over recent years to meet these changing needs and will need to continue to do so to remain relevant and useful to 21<sup>st</sup> century visitors.

We believe that the future of the TIC is in part to become the hub of the Discover Carlisle Brand. The aim of the Discover Carlisle brand is:-

‘To provide a dynamic information service which is the go-to place to discover everything there is to see and do in Carlisle and the immediate surrounding area.’

To help deliver and support this aim there will need to be a continuing shift in the focus of the TIC and a greater emphasis on promoting Carlisle as a visitor destination.

Currently we provide a wide range of information and literature not just for Carlisle and Cumbria but for the country as a whole. In order to become a hub for Discover Carlisle, our focus needs to be more on events and attractions in the city and the immediate surrounding area than on holidays to other regions. The function of the TIC Assistants needs to be reviewed to align with this change in direction.

With this refocus we have the opportunity for the Old Town Hall to become a Visitor Centre for Carlisle, expanding beyond the exiting TIC service. With this focus, along with the delivery of the information service a visitor centre could facilitate a wide variety of activities including

- Talks, Tours & Workshops
- Exhibitions
- Holiday clubs & Family activities
- Event support
- Pop-up shops & craft fayres
- Schools visits

Beyond the TIC there is an opportunity to develop a wider remit to a 'Tourism Service' which focusses on the promotion and marketing of Carlisle as a place rather than the management of a TIC for people once they arrive.

Analysis of visitor numbers within the most recent Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor (STEAM) report, which is the industry standard measure of tourism activity, shows that the majority of visitors to Carlisle remain day visitors, with overnight and longer stays more limited. Carlisle continues to operate as a 'sub-regional' capital for Cumbria and South West Scotland.

STEAM data also shows the city is primarily drawing people in for shopping, food and drink, and for events, including Carlisle City Council's own events programme – with spikes in Discover Carlisle hits and social media interaction demonstrable around the Fireshow, Christmas Light Switch-On etc.

If Carlisle wishes to simultaneously attract more visitors from further afield (to consolidate and increase growth) and to convert more day visits into overnight stays (for obvious economic benefit) then the identification of Carlisle's unique or key selling points, and an association of Carlisle with a particular tourism product or narrative will be important.

There is scope to further define Carlisle's distinct tourism products and unique selling points (including Roman heritage and state management) in order to promote and market Carlisle more effectively as a place at a regional, national and international level.

Over the coming months it is proposed that a new tourism and marketing plan is developed for the TIC, presenting a business model and approach that helps deliver these aims.

## **4.2 Discover Carlisle Online Resources**

The new website focus has been on the visitor market and careful consideration is being paid to the content and the visuals to ensure a wider appeal. The current site is very text based so we have focussed on images to encourage users to explore and discover. We have also had difficulties with using the exiting site on tablets and smart phones so this has been a major consideration throughout the development process.

Currently we have large amount of users which are local to Carlisle and one of the principle goals of the new site is to appeal to users outside of the region. The site aims to give an overview of the city, painting an image of a vibrant, exiting destination.

The decision has been made to focus local content, such as community events, onto social media mainly Facebook as over 52% of our followers are local.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.1** Members are asked to note the content of the report in order that they are aware of and understand the progress being made with respect to the operation of the Old Town Hall and the Discover Carlisle Online resources, and proposals to develop a new Tourism and Marketing Plan for the TIC reflecting a change in emphasis for the service.

## **6. CONTRIBUTION TO THE CARLISLE PLAN PRIORITIES**

- 6.1** Continued operation and future development of the Tourist Information Centre service, Assembly Room and Discover Carlisle brand contribute directly towards the promotion of Carlisle, regionally, nationally and internationally as a premier destination– full of opportunity and potential.

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**Appendices  
attached to report:**

Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers:



- None

## **CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS/RISKS:**

**Chief Executive's -**

**Deputy Chief Executive –**

**Economic Development –**

**Governance –**

**Local Environment –**

**Resources -**