

Report to Environment & Economy Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Agenda Item:
A.5

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

Title: TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE UPDATE
 Report of: The Deputy Chief Executive
 Report Number: CS 02/17

Purpose / Summary:

To update Members of the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel on the operation and performance of the Tourist Information Centre and AssemblyRoom.

Recommendations:

That Members of the panel review the content of the report and make comment on the progress made from 2015 to date.

Tracking

Executive:	N/A
Overview and Scrutiny:	
Council:	N/A

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 The capital upgrade works to the Old Town Hall / Tourist Information Centre (TIC) have provided the facilities to enable the TIC to act as a modern gateway to Carlisle's Historic and Cultural attractions. The works to the TIC have provided improved access from street level to the first floor and significantly improved the external and internal fabric of the building. The TIC plays an important role in orientating visitors, providing information on key historic assets and the wider offer.
- 1.2 As the strategic hub for visitors coming to explore Carlisle and the adjacent regions, the TIC provides a clear starting point for the visitor journey; whether it is a short walk around the historic centre of Carlisle, or exploring further afield into Hadrian's Wall Country, the Lake District or South West Scotland.
- 1.2 The aim of these works were to: preserve the fabric and appearance of the Old Town Hall as a key historic property in the City; increase interpretation of the historic value of building and area; make better and more use of the facilities and modernise the service to be more customer friendly and fit for purpose.
- 1.3 Given the breadth of the TIC customer base, consideration has been given to the range of media used to communicate tourism information and interpretation to the widest possible audience.
- 1.4 New lighting has made a significant improvement and with the new lobby area, the entrance to the building is an inviting space, open and airy. The two information points which customers can use to browse the internet provide up-to-date information on local attractions. The three screens incorporated within the discovery wall provide an opportunity for advertising and displaying information on events that are taking place across the city. Additionally the projector screens on the six windows provide a unique opportunity to promote what is "GREAT" about Carlisle after hours.
- 1.5 The Assembly Room has been sympathetically restored back to its former glory by exposing the original fireplace, extending the panels on the ceiling, improving

the lighting and refurbishing the window bays. The room now is a beautiful light and airy space that adapts itself well to any event that is taking place.

- 1.6 In light of the opportunities presented by these improvements, the aim now is for the TIC and Assembly Room to be more commercial.

2. BUSINESS PLAN & MARKETING STRATEGY

- 2.1 The TIC has always drawn an income from various sources – shop sales, booking fees, ticket sales and room hire. Until recent years this income has always been viewed as secondary to the provision of impartial, unbiased tourism advice and information.
- 2.2 The rise of internet usage for tourism purposes (accommodation, guides, maps etc.) and the increasing need for local authorities to balance expenditure with income has led TIC's to refocus on providing a more rounded service that still includes face to face advice but now also has strong links to web based services, retail and commercial activities.
- 2.3 During the redevelopment of the Old Town Hall the TIC service has embarked on a transformation of its services and is now developing a full business plan and marketing strategy. Whilst this work is still, to some degree, under development significant activity has already helped guide this transformation. An overview of this work is outlined below.

3. MARKETING THE TIC, EVENTS & OLD TOWN HALL

- 3.1 Promotion of all aspects of the Old Town Hall are currently being developed with the key aims being to raise the awareness of the TIC services, events taking place in Carlisle and usage of the Assembly Room. T

This work is being done in a number of ways and the activity is also being closely monitored. The TIC Team have been concentrating on developing an online presence by creating a website for the Old Town Hall, (<http://www.oldtownhallcarlisle.co.uk/>).

This is a dual purpose site to promote the TIC and the Assembly Room. Ongoing marketing promoting our offer is also being carried out through social media channels, press releases and partnership working. The TIC also makes extensive use of the Discover Carlisle website (www.discovercarlisle.co.uk). This umbrella site is currently beginning a review and redevelopment exercise in order to pave the way for a new offer in late 2017.

3.2 MARKETING ACTIVITY– TOURISM, EVENTS AND COMMERCIAL USE

Marketing Activity	Timing	Monitoring Methods	Person Responsible
Old Town hall website – this is dual purpose, promoting the TIC and Assembly Room	Ongoing	Google Analytics	Jo Mills and Marketing & training consultant
Facebook for the Assembly Room to advertise events, share pictures and increase awareness.	Ongoing	Increase in general activity	Jo Mills & Michelle Masters
Press Releases	Ongoing	Increase in enquiries/footfall	Jo Mills
Discover Carlisle Guide	Feb 2017	Repeat Visitors/increase in enquiries	Communications Team & TIC Staff
Season Events Guides	Ongoing	Increase visitors and spend across the city	Communications Team & TIC Staff
Information point at Carlisle Citadel station for steam days	Ongoing	Increased Footfall/use of voucher on steam train leaflet	TIC Staff

Wedding
guide/feature

Ongoing

Increase in
enquiries/bookings
for weddings

Jo Mills

4. MONITORING OF PERFORMANCE

4.1 ASSEMBLY ROOM

4.2 Since the completion of the improvement works Assembly Room lettings have substantially increased over 2016. The income for the Assembly Room as of November 2016 is £5,664. This has meant we have already more than doubled our target of £2,500 in the 2016/17 financial year. This was largely due to a number of regular/long bookings that occurred over the summer.

4.3 We have been granted a wedding Licence for the Assembly Room. We are now able to hire the room for small wedding ceremonies, renewal of vows etc. We have our first wedding booked in for October 2017.

There is now a premises licence in place, which means the sale of alcohol is permitted with the Assembly Room and TIC.

4.4 We also saw a return of regular bookings in 2016, with monthly craft fairs taking place throughout the year. This series of events has just been re-booked for 2017. Feedback from customers has also been very encouraging with excellent comments from past and future users. For example:

“The new access is great both for stallholders and visitors to the event. The new entrance is light and modern and draws visitors in well. The easily visible lift access is also great for older visitors and families with pushchairs. The room itself is light and airy and the new furniture is great”

4.5 VISITOR STATISTICS

4.6 Visitor numbers had increased slightly from September to December 2015 following the opening of the newly refurbished building; however they have declined over the 2016 season.

This reduction is largely due to the closure of the Settle to Carlisle railway line north of Appleby. This conclusion has been reached by reviewing a number of sources. Appleby TIC has report a 50% increase in visitors over the 2016 season, our visitor survey demonstrated that a large number of people arrive in Carlisle by train (36%). We also estimate that of the passengers on a steam excursion up to 50% would use the TIC for information. We anticipate the line will re-open at the end of March 2017. TIC staff will be working to encourage these visitors to use the TIC over the coming season.

TIC Visitor Numbers 2014 – 2016

	2014	2015	2016
Jan	4050	1943	3132
Feb	4989	2003	3879
Mar	7632	4420	4920
Apr	7725	4368	4904
May	9141	4948	6672
Jun	9993	6201	6386
Jul	11652	6469	7306
Aug	13650	10527	10537
Sep	8570	9383	7705
Oct	7309	7456	6471
Nov	8588	8074	6379
Dec	4639	5044	4735
Total	97938	70835	73026

NB - Jan 2015 – Jul 2015 TIC in Scotch St

4.6 VISITOR SURVEY

4.7 A survey was conducted in the TIC over the 2016 summer season. Approximately 300 people were questioned on subjects ranging from the TIC refurbishment to the service offer in the office.

Some key results are listed below:

- How would you rate the service provided by the TIC?

Very Good	65.14%
Good	36.86
Poor	0.00%
Very Poor	0.00%

- Where did you find information on what Carlisle has to offer?

Internet	26.11%
Carlisle TIC	46.50%
Discover Carlisle Guide	0.64%
Friends & family	0.64%
Guidebook/leaflet	10.83%
Other	24.28%

- How did you travel to Carlisle?

Car/van/motorcycle/motorhome	47.77%
Bus/coach	12.74%
Coach Trip	2.55%
Train	35.67%
Cycle	0.64%
Foot	0.64%

- How would you rate your overall experience in Carlisle?

Very Good	40.30%
Good	55.97%
Satisfactory	3.73%
Poor	0.00%
Very Poor	0.00%

- When asked what could be improved in both the TIC and the city a large number of people commented on the signage saying it was poor or inadequate.

- When asked about the refurbishment of the TIC most people responded positively saying it was light, airy, smart etc.

4.7 INCOME

4.8 Income and cost management are key monitoring areas for the TIC. Performance against income targets for 2016/17 (to end of period 8 – Nov) demonstrates some significant variance against budget.

Positively, income from room hire and ticket sales are performing better than anticipated levels, reflecting the new Assembly Room and an increase in tickets sales for events and activities in the city region.

Conversely income from shop sales and commission from accommodation are both well below budget expectations. However these targets do not give the whole picture as the shop sales still yield a surplus of £5,426 when the cost of sales has been taken into account.

Description	Base Budget	Budget to date (Nov 16)	Actual to date (Nov 16)	Variance
Room hire	2,500	1,668	5,664	(3,996)
Sale of goods	64,700	53,660	19,961	33,699
Ticket sales	75,900	42,172	46,321	(4,149)
Commission on accommodation	20,500	19,772	204	19,569
Total	163,600	117,272	72,150	45,122

As mentioned at the beginning of section 2. The TIC business plan is now under development. The setting of appropriate targets for shop sales and accommodation commission will be a key task for review. The trend on both of these lines of income has been downward for over five years and clearly the business plan of this facility needs to take these trends into account.

Additional income streams are being developed and the main area that's being looked at is for advertising on the internal and external screens. Businesses

are being approached and take up has already begun, most notably from English Heritage. The rate card below sets out the cost of advertising.

5. RETAIL DEVELOPMENT

5.1 The Tourist Information Centre now stocks a diverse range of local and nationally produced souvenirs. The new retail area is reduced in size from the former layout but now concentrates on providing a higher quality offer of locally produced products targeted at the customer. We are mindful of the need to promote the offer and monitor stock turn over and adjust our purchasing plan to ensure that we provide a range of goods, appropriate to the time of the year and customer need. We also monitor sales and income via a stock system that records all incoming and outgoing stock and the valuation. Mini Stock takes take throughout the year with an annual check being completed on the 31st March.

5.2 Our purchasing plan ensures that we now stock a good selection of locally produced, quality goods. Some examples include:

Herdy products – Keswick

Cartmel Toffee Sauce – Cartmel

Carwinley Preserves – Longtown

The Carlisle Brewing Company – Carlisle

Kendal Mint cake Liqueur - Kendal

Temporary Measures – Keswick

Lakes Distillery - Bassenthwaite

Farrers Tea – Kendal

5.3 We are also using a full range of marketing channels to promote what is on offer within the TIC, examples of these efforts are recorded below:

How	What
Website	Use the Old Town Hall website to showcase our popular, new and locally produced items and ticket sales
Social	Top sellers and new items are to be promoted on TIC social media

media	weekly. Photographs are used to enhance posts
Press Release	Any new developments or speciality products are to be promoted with a press release provided by the communication team at Carlisle City Council.
TV Screens	The TV screens are to be used to advertise event tickets and TIC services. Include new or speciality items and special offers.
Email	When replying to email, highlight stock items when appropriate to enquiry.
Retail display	Keep the retail areas looking fresh with rotation of stock products. Seasonal stock to be displayed on prominent retail units.

6. STAFF

- 6.1 Staffing levels are being monitored and adjusted to meet with customer demand. The office operates on a seasonal basis with increased staffing in the summer period; currently this is being managed by casual staffing to cover the weekends and busier periods but seasonal staff may be required in 2017.
- 6.2 Tourist Information Officer Laura Thompson is on maternity leave as of 1st January 2017. The current senior information assistant, Jo Mills has assumed Laura's role and a new assistant has been recruited for the duration of the maternity leave.
- 6.3 The skills of staff are maintained through continual training to meet the Tourist Information centre requirements internally and externally. Training is identified through regular one to one meetings and appraisals.

6.4. Staff Training Plan

Training Activity	Timing	Deliver by
Social media	Ongoing	Marketing and training consultants Kate Wilson & Michelle Masters
Over the Counter Sales	Ongoing	Jo Mills
Customer Service	Ongoing	Jo Mills
Familiarisation Visit	Two each year	Jo Mills/TIC Staff

7. NEXT STEPS

- 7.1 To progress with the development and implementation of the business plan, marketing strategy and training to strengthen the commercial operation of the TIC and Assembly Room with the aim of maximising income whilst providing the customer with a first class experience and building a loyal customer base.
- 7.2 To act as the information hub for Carlisle, working closely with partners and promoting the Carlisle offer in the widest sense. To progress the opportunities for joint working with local attractions which include: Carlisle Castle, Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle Cathedral, the Cumbria Museum of Military Life.

8. CONCLUSION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 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 Tourist Information Centre and Assembly Room following refurbishment of the building.

9. CONTRIBUTION TO THE CARLISLE PLAN PRIORITIES

- 9.1 Continued implementation of the business plan for the ongoing operation of the Tourist Information Centre and Assembly Room contributes directly and indirectly towards the promotion of Carlisle, regionally, nationally and abroad as a place with much to offer – full of opportunities and potential.

Contact Officer: Jo Mills **Tel:** 595294

Appendices attached to report: None

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 -