

TOURISM REVIEW

THE FUTURE OF THE LYNDHURST VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE (VIC)

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 As part of a wide series of service review across the Council, that commenced in 2016 the Tourism Service has been looked at in detail. One element of this service is that provided by the VIC in Lyndhurst. The review being undertaken has looked to assess whether this still represent the best way of delivering services to visitors, whether it meets the needs of tourism partners and does it for the Council represent good value for money given current economic pressures in the public sector.
- 1.2 This report deals only with the future of the Lyndhurst VIC. Other elements of the tourism service are also at an advanced stage of a review, and will be consulted on separately.

2. THE ROLE OF THE VIC

- 2.1 Since 1987 when the Tourism Service was first established, the council has provided VICs to support the process of good visitor management by providing visitors with the best quality information about how to behave and enjoy the forest as well as what to see and do and where to stay.
- 2.2 By the early 1990's the council was supporting VICs in Lyndhurst, Ringwood and Lymington. At this time footfall in the original VIC in Lyndhurst was over 300,000. Since then however, footfall has steadily reduced at Lyndhurst to a point where between 2011 and 2016 footfall has dropped from 184,524 to 136,224.
- 2.3 The number of accommodation bookings has also dropped considerably over the same period. In 2011 the VIC took 212 bookings for 648 bednights of accommodation. By 2016 this had fallen to 111 bookings for 144 bednights of accommodation. Between April and August of 2016 the VIC took only 65 accommodation bookings in the peak tourism season.

3. CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY

- 3.1 For a long period and before the arrival of the digital age, VICs played a crucial role as visitors often arrived without having accommodation arranged or wondering what to do to enjoy their time in the New Forest or to find other attractions, for example if the weather was not good. The Council had previously operated VIC's at Ringwood and Lymington which are no longer in use.
- 3.2 In the modern day, many visitors have access to many forms of digital technology and use this to obtain the information that they once would have obtained only from a VIC.
- 3.3 So the question the review has considered is whether the current financial cost (Budget £62,000) of the Lyndhurst VIC can still be justified in today's digital society?

4. THE VIEWS OF PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

- 4.1 To help answer the questions posed above, the review has engaged with a range of partner organisations and stakeholders involved in the tourism sector, to obtain their insight and crucially, whether they would be prepared to support the ongoing function of the VIC.
- 4.2 The New Forest Tourism Association do not consider that the retention of the VIC is of sufficient importance to their members' tourism interests to be able to support its retention in the long term.
- 4.3 Since 2006 the New Forest National Park Authority (NPA) has had a role to play in providing information to visitors to - and local people within - the National Park, through a range of means (including face to face, literature and on-line). However, the NPA has faced similar budget pressures to the Council and is unable to commit to funding the VIC in its present form.
- 4.4 The Ninth Centenary Trust who are responsible for the management of the New Forest Centre accept that there is a need for change. They are not in a position to support the VIC in its current form, but are prepared to review activities carried out in the front of house at the New Forest Centre. This could include take on some of the sales functions currently undertaken by the Council. Subject to the outcome of this consultation, those discussions will continue in more detail.

5. THE STAFFING AND FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Lyndhurst VIC currently employs 5 staff (4.5 FTE's). 4 of these are part-time, staff contracted to 53.85 hours per week, plus a budget for the employment of casual staff.
- 5.2 The direct staffing cost of the VIC is £62,000 per annum. In addition, there are rental and other premises costs amounting to £20,090 per annum. The management costs of the Centre amount to £20,000 including a senior management cost of £8,300.
- 5.3 Goods and services provided from the VIC generate a gross profit of £20,370 (£53,780-£74,150) to offset the expenditure set out above. Some of these services could still be provided from the adjoining New Forest Centre as mentioned in paragraph 4.4 above, subject to further negotiations.
- 5.4 A separate community grant of £13,770 is paid to the Ninth Centenary Trust.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE REVIEW PROCESS

- 6.1 The role of VICs has changed in the digital age and they are not as important to the tourism sector as they were some years ago. This is evidenced by earlier changes in which the Council has closed down VICs or transferred their operation to other groups.
- 6.2 With the need for the service as recognised by other partners having changed there are no options for continuing with the current service. The New Forest Tourism Association do not consider the operation of the VIC to be an essential part of its relationship with the Council, which is being discussed as part of the wider review.
- 6.3 The New Forest Centre (Ninth Centenary Trust) may, subject to further discussions take on some of the sales elements provided by the VIC.

6.4 The consequence of these various factors is that the recommendation is that Lyndhurst VIC, as operated by the Council will close after the completion of all due processes and before the start of 2017 tourism season. Negotiations will continue with the Ninth Centenary Trust.

7. CONSULTATION

7.1 The contents of this report are now the subject of formal consultation with the staff affected and the other groups involved in the review process. This will run from 7th to 21st October. Following the end of the consultation process EMT will consider all of the comments received and decide how to proceed, including the nature of any political decision which is required.

7.2 If the decision is to close the VIC, the staff involved will be under threat of redundancy unless any alternative roles can be found for them under the Council's 'At Risk' procedures. The total cost of making the 5 staff redundant would be in the region of £48,000.

8. STAFF SIDE COMMENTS

As set out in the report to the Cabinet

Further information

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