

Overview of Responses and Recommendations

Budget Proposals 16/17: Visitor Information Service		Paul James - Culture Manager	19 January 2016 Version 2 (Exec)
Proposal:	To cease funding the Visitor Information Service based at the Town Hall (Newbury Town Council premises).		
Total budget 15/16:	£62,000	Recommended officer saving 16/17:	£62,000 (100%)
Initial proposed saving 16/17:	£62,000 (100%)	Final recommendation to Executive 16/17:	To proceed with this savings proposal, without any modifications.
Nos of responses:	142 in total, three from Town / Parish Councils (Newbury Town Council, Pangbourne and Compton Parish Councils). The Newbury Business Innovation District (BID), West Berkshire Green Party, West Berkshire Ramblers and the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust (Enterprise) Ltd also responded.		
Key issues raised:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of friendly and knowledgeable face to face information services that benefit visitors – particularly the elderly, vulnerable people, people without access to IT, and overseas visitors and others with limited English language skills. • Loss of face to face ticket sales service for coach travel and tickets for local events. • Potential damage to the visitor economy – particularly smaller businesses in Newbury including places to eat, shop and stay overnight. • Potential loss of reputation – is Newbury welcoming to visitors? • Town centre location vital for this type of service. 		
Equality issues:	None were drawn out from the responses.		
Suggestions for reducing the impact on service users:	Suggestion	Council response	
	Involve volunteers rather than paid staff.	The VIC staff team is a small team of one full-time and 3 part time staff totalling 2.14 FTE. Staff costs are 94% of the net cost of the service. Recruitment, care, organisation of rotas and general management of volunteers by the council will require a paid staff which in turn would not achieve the saving required. Sole use of volunteers may be possible if the entire service was transferred to a voluntary group at zero cost to the Council.	

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	Parish and town councils to fund the service	No Parish and Town Councils have come forward during this consultation to express an interest in contributing towards funding the service. There is no government or other external grant support for doing so other than some small one-off development grants for local economic development initiatives. There has been some discussion between the Council and Newbury Town Council, however the Town Council is unable to provide funding towards the service nor 'take on' the service in its current form	
Alternative options for applying the saving in this area:	Suggestion	Council response	
	Maintain location at Town Hall and reduce staff hours.	<p>94% of the net cost of the VIC service is in staffing. Reducing the small staff team (2.14 FTE) will reduce accessibility to the service and so the number of users is likely to decrease. The saving target would not be achieved.</p> <p>The VIC sells tickets for coach companies and local events. These can be, or are already, provided by other service providers in the town centre. For example, the Corn Exchange provides a box office service for other venues and events which offers face to face/over the counter, telephone and online sales. They are open 7 days a week and 2 hours longer each day than the VIC. The VIC doesn't provide an online event tickets service.</p>	
	Move service to Newbury Library and/or West Berkshire Museum.	<p>Library and Museum staff and volunteers are fully occupied delivering those services. There is no spare capacity. VIC Staff costs are 94% of the net cost of the service. Moving staff to another location won't deliver the required cost saving.</p> <p>There is no capacity within a remaining resource to manage even a reduced form of the service e.g. provision of leaflets, event details etc, an appropriate resource would be required therefore the full saving would not be achieved.</p>	
	Further development of website and/or other web based services.	<p>The VISIT NEWBURY website is operated by the Newbury BID, this decision will therefore be for them to make. The Council funded some of the set up costs and currently the VIC staff add local event information to the site and this element will be lost with the cessation of the service. Newbury BID can provide more visitor information on the site http://www.visitnewbury.org.uk/ but to do so they estimate that they will require funding for 15 – 20 hours of staff time each week .</p>	

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Suggestions for how others may help contribute:	<p>Use of volunteers</p> <p>Large local businesses to help out with funding</p>		
Officer conclusion as a result of the responses:	<p>Local people (particularly older and vulnerable people and those who do not have access to IT), as well as visitors, highly value the service provided by the VIC staff. Many have commented that the staff are well trained, knowledgeable and regarded as a friendly “public face” for Newbury. There is also evidence that some vulnerable people know and trust the staff and value the VIC as a haven if they feel unsafe in the town centre. This is not the role of the service however.</p> <p>The majority of the costs associated with the service is staffing therefore simply moving to another location will not achieve the target saving.</p> <p>The use of volunteers can be explored but in representing the Council service would need to be managed/supervised and as such again the saving target would not be achieved.</p> <p>The growing use of online information and booking services continues to move business away from location-based/face to face customer services which have some notable disadvantages – for example, the VIC is not open 24/7, does not offer online booking facilities and does not have a presence elsewhere in the district – for example, Hungerford, Thatcham or Pangbourne. The public take-up of all kinds of online services is on the increase, due to increased availability of affordable and easy to use web-enabled devices, ‘apps’ and services, with the advantage that people can access information and services from wherever they are, at any time of the day. There is some evidence to suggest that this trend is affecting the VIC. The VIC staff help the Newbury BID by adding local event information to the VISIT NEWBURY website. Newbury BID can provide more visitor information on the site but estimate that they will require funding for 15 – 20 hours of input each week to be able to do so.</p>		
Officer recommendation as a result of responses:	<p>Feedback has not uncovered any further issues which would prevent the council from proceeding with this proposal. It's therefore recommended to implement this proposal with no changes.</p>		

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