

AYLESBURY VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE

Councillor Mrs Macpherson

Cabinet Member for Leisure, Communities and Civic Amenities

1. Purpose and scope

- 1.1 This report outlines the current operation of the Aylesbury Visitor Information Centre and details options for the future of the service.

2. Recommendations for decision

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Close the Aylesbury Visitor Information Centre (VIC) from late March 2016 and reinvest the current budget* in more effective visitor economy support.
- 2.2 Authorise the Senior Communications and Marketing Officer in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Leisure, Communities and Civic Amenities to progress all necessary works to implement the closure.

* This should be considered as part of the wider budget report considered by Cabinet in December 2015

3. Supporting Information

Current Situation

- 3.1 This report has been produced as a result of significant changes to the structure of tourism support within AVDC, as well as external changes and the on-going declining footfall at the Visitor Information Centre (VIC).

A changing town centre

- 3.2 Work on the Aylesbury Town Centre Improvement Plan is transforming the town:
- A Marketing Aylesbury Group (MAG), led by AVDC, has been established. The MAG is working on a strategic marketing plan for the town aimed at both residents and visitors, which includes a website for the town centre which launched in October 2015.
 - A signage audit and strategy has been completed. The strategy includes wayfinding and interpretation information aimed at visitors to the town. Funding for the implementation needs to be secured.

AVDC Capacity

- 3.3 Loss of staff with a tourism role within AVDC;
- The Senior Communications and Marketing Officer and Communications and Marketing Officer for Leisure, who have been responsible for tourism delivery, relocated to the Communications and Marketing Team in August 2014 to take on a Council-wide remit. As a result the capacity within these roles to promote the VIC has reduced significantly.

- The Community Development Manager's post was made redundant in November 2014, which means that responsibility for the VIC has moved to the Senior Communications and Marketing Officer.

4. Aylesbury Visitor Information Centre

Original Purpose

- 4.1 Budget £63,200. A more detailed budget is in Appendix 1.
- 4.2 Officer time £4,542 per year (2hrs/week)
- 4.3 AVDC currently provides the Visitor Information Centre (VIC) in Aylesbury, based at the King's Head. The Council used to also run the Tourist Information Centre in Buckingham until 2010/11, but due to budget cuts the Centre was handed over to Buckingham Town Council to run. The Information Centre in Wendover was closed in Autumn 2014 by Wendover Parish Council.
- 4.4 Tourism South East manage the VIC service on behalf of AVDC which keeps costs and overheads comparatively low. The contract was recently re-negotiated with AVDC benefitting from a 40% profit share of sales, which resulted in an approximate cashback saving of £2,000/year (which represents just over 4% of the management costs).
- 4.5 The aim of the VIC is to enhance visitors' experience, effectively up-selling opportunities and attractions in the area to them, thereby ensuring greater expenditure and investment in the local economy which supports businesses and jobs. Staff at the Aylesbury VIC support the promotion of Aylesbury Vale, help to engage with tourism businesses and support visitors and residents who do not have access to online services or who may struggle to find information through the internet themselves.
- 4.6 The VIC supports the Aylesbury Town Centre Improvement Plan by helping to support the ambition of Aylesbury becoming an arts and entertainment town (as its Unique Selling Proposition) by providing an outlet for local artists and craft makers to sell their work.

Changing Position

- 4.7 Footfall and enquiries at Aylesbury VIC have been falling year on year since 2011. The footfall for the first six months of the current financial year is slightly lower than the same period in 2014. (See appendix 2) This is due to a number of factors, including:
 - the economic downturn
 - the National Trust's disinvestment in the King's Head site and the closure of other shops on the site
 - changing behaviour trends for sourcing information i.e. internet
- 4.8 A location move for the VIC to a more prominent site has been discussed on a number of occasions. However, finding the right location with a low rent has proved difficult.
- 4.9 Analysis of the Aylesbury VIC's users between December 2014 and September 2015 has revealed that approximately 30% are visitors and 70% are local residents. (See appendix 3) This compares to a national average statistic of 60% of TIC users being visitors and 40% being local residents from

a national audit undertaken by Visit England in 2013. Historical data on the users of Aylesbury VIC isn't available, therefore it is not possible to determine whether the user profile has changed over time or to quantify how this balance may change if the centre was relocated.

4.10 Of the respondents to an Aylesbury VIC survey 94% said that they usually go to a VIC when visiting a new area, despite information being available online. 47% of these respondents were aged between 65 & 74 and 32% between 45 & 64 years.

4.11 The VIC offers a range of services (see appendix 4); analysis shows that the majority are also now offered by other outlets in the town centre. Those services which aren't currently duplicated or are only partially replicated are:

- sale of local event tickets
- sale of Aylesbury merchandise
- local accommodation bookings
- provision of UK holiday information

4.12 Both the sale of local event tickets and sale of Aylesbury merchandise are partially duplicated by entertainment venues such as Bucks County Museum and there is scope and potential interest from entertainment venues to offer a greater provision in the future.

4.13 There has been a decline in accommodation bookings made through the VIC; a total of 41 bednights were booked through the VIC in 2014/15. See appendix 5.

4.14 The provision of UK holiday information does not offer commercial gain and is therefore unlikely to be taken up by other outlets in the town centre in the future.

5. Options Considered

5.1 The options for consideration have been laid out in a series of tables below. Each option is examined with regards to its impact on AVDC and its impact on the district.

Increase investment

<p style="text-align: center;">Details</p>	<p>Relocate VIC to a shared location, offering cost reductions and greater income generation potential</p> <p>Despite the aborted proposal to move Aylesbury Library and the VIC to the district council's 66 High Street offices in 2013, the prospect of Aylesbury VIC sharing space with the library in its current location on Walton Street is still an option. Initial scoping suggests a one-off capital investment being required to provide the necessary on-site infrastructure, but this would enable the opportunity for far greater merchandising sales, guaranteed passing footfall and potentially result in the service running at a lower cost.</p> <p>Other co-location options could also be investigated, such as entertainment venues, or other locations which reflect the suggestion from Visit England, that:</p> <p>“Provision of visitor information is likely to change dramatically over the next 10 years. More and more visitors will use the internet to plan their visit. In-destination information will see a growth in the use of smart phones to access information on demand, but 'face to face' information and advice will continue to be important. However, this will be available in different locations such as retailers, restaurants, travel agents, transport operators, car rental companies and public houses who will have found that they can increase their business and increase customer satisfaction by providing visitor information as part of their service.”</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Impact on AVDC</p>	<p>Budget saving: Reduction in running cost of the Centre. By Year 3 annual costs could have reduced from £67,742 to £7,310 (including staff time)*</p> <p>One-off capital investment of £30,000 (est)</p> <p>Supports the Aylesbury Town Centre vision</p> <p>Delivering this level of work will require additional officer time (estimated 40 days/year) to be created or diverted from other work</p> <p>Risk that if sole current officer delivering visitor economy leaves, then replacement Snr Communications and Marketing Officer is unlikely to have the knowledge or background to continue this work</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Impact on the district</p>	<p>Greater reach of visitors and residents about the Aylesbury Vale offer</p> <p>Greater reach should result in increase in footfall at attractions and extended or return visits to the district</p> <p>Larger merchandise space could be utilised to support more local artists/craft makers</p>

*Based on projections of a co-location with Aylesbury Library, moving from TSE managing the centre to a shared service with Bucks CC from Year 3 onwards.

Business as usual

Details	Continue to provide VIC service in current location
Impact on AVDC	<p>Significant budget (£67,742 combined budget and officer time cost per year) being spent with a declining impact/benefit</p> <p>Potential need to increase officer time above 2hrs/week to drive footfall</p> <p>Negative perception of maintaining a service not fit for purpose</p> <p>Risk that if sole current officer delivering visitor economy leaves, then replacement Snr Communications and Marketing Officer is unlikely to have the knowledge or background to continue this work</p>
Impact on the district	<p>VIC does not fulfil role - for visitors</p> <p>Access issues for those with walking difficulties, wheelchair users and those with pushchairs results in a service which isn't available to all residents and visitors</p>

Decrease investment

Details	<p>Handover the Visitor Information Centre to Aylesbury Town Council, if they want to take over the service, at nil cost to the District Council</p> <p>The research, data and options for the VIC have been discussed informally with the Clerk of Aylesbury Town Council in order to ensure that all possible factors and solutions have been considered for this report. Aylesbury Town Council will formulate an opinion once their Members have discussed the full report.</p>
Impact on AVDC	<p>Service sustained, whilst creating a budget saving for AVDC (Year 1 either* £55,995 or £65,995 combined budget and officer time saved after deduction of officer time cost for handover. Year 2 onwards £67,742 combined budget and officer time saved per year.)</p> <p>Officer capacity for other work is increased, following estimated 40hrs officer time for handover (approximate cost of £1,747)</p> <p>Saved budget could be channelled into Aylesbury Town Centre Plan improvements such as signage implementation in the short term</p> <p>*Staff may be eligible for TUPE, but if not redundancy payments of approx. £10,000 would be required</p>
Impact on the district	<p>Issues and concerns set out in section 4 including declining footfall still not addressed</p>

Cease investment

Details	Close the VIC (and replace with static or digital information at key gateways into the town and other high footfall areas as part of signage strategy)
Impact on AVDC	<p>Budget and officer capacity saving in Year 1 of £56,000 (combined budget and officer time savings after deduction of approx £10,000 redundancy payments and £1,966 officer time for closure process)</p> <p>Budget and officer capacity saving from Year 2 onwards £67,742 per year (combined budget and officer time saving)</p> <p>Estimated 45hrs of officer time to close the centre (approximate cost of £1,966)</p> <p>Potential negative perception and media coverage in short term</p> <p>Saved budget could be channelled into Aylesbury Town Centre Plan improvements such as signage implementation in the short term. (This should be considered as part of the wider budget report considered by Cabinet in December 2015.)</p>
Impact on the district	<p>Loss of support on additional duties such as updating Visit Bucks website</p> <p>Loss of support for local artists/craft makers</p> <p>Visitors may not appreciate the full Aylesbury Vale offer</p> <p>Loss of face-to-face services only VIC offers e.g. accommodation bookings</p> <p>Opportunity for other businesses to take on services e.g. local event tickets, Aylesbury merchandise</p> <p>24hr access to information in Aylesbury town centre through new information points</p>

6 Reasons for recommendation

6.1 Having considered the findings and options, it is recommended to close the Visitor Information Centre from late March 2016 and divert the budget to town centre improvements, which will support the visitor economy in a more effective way, such as the implementation of the signage strategy.

In summary, this is because:

- The centre is no longer meeting its primary purpose of serving visitors to the town and area
- Visitors and residents are gaining information through other mediums, predominantly online, resulting in an ongoing decrease in footfall. The new Visit Aylesbury website has just been launched and provides 24/7 information for visitors to the town centre.
- Relocating to a shared location would require additional short term investment and additional ongoing staff resource, but the cost saving projections cannot be guaranteed
- Improvements to information at gateway points (car parks, stations etc) and signage would meet the needs of the majority of visitors to the town
- The majority of services offered at the centre are also provided by other outlets in the town

- Transferring the centre to another organisation, such as the Aylesbury Town Council, would not solve the issues and concerns listed above.
- The current contract with Tourism South East ends on 31 March 2016, with notice being required three months ahead, therefore a decision needs to be taken now.

7. Resource Implications

7.1 These are dealt with in the body of the report.

Contact Officer	Lyndsay Purdie	01296 585783
Background Documents	Appendix 1	Visitor Information Centre budget breakdown
	Appendix 2	Footfall comparison
	Appendix 3	Users – residents vs visitors
	Appendix 4	VIC Services
	Appendix 5	Accommodation bookings

Appendix 1

Visitor Information Centre budget breakdown

Area of work	Spend
Management fee inc staff	£44,000*
Rent	£7,500
Business rates	£2,500
Utilities	£5,400
Maintenance	£300
Marketing	£3,466
Insurance	£34
Total	£63,200

*Approximate, as TSE management contract cost is subject to profit share which will reduce the yearly fee slightly, and it is likely that cost will see a % increase in the future

Appendix 2

Footfall Comparison

	2015/16			2014/15			2013/14			2012/13		
Month	Walk-in visitors	Walk-in overseas visitors	Total footfall	Walk-in visitors	Walk-in overseas visitors	Total footfall	Walk-in visitors	Walk-in overseas visitors	Total footfall	Walk-in visitors	Walk-in overseas visitors	Total footfall
April	698	87	785	983	51	1,034	1,009	133	1,142	1,503	61	1,564
May	642	73	715	728	98	826	1,011	149	1,160	1,360	59	1,419
June	803	72	875	700	73	773	1,141	111	1,252	1,563	64	1,627
July	929	123	1,052	1,022	120	1,142	1,433	163	1,596	1,760	162	1,922
August	1,042	129	1,171	1,068	94	1,162	1,524	249	1,773	1,464	114	1,578
September	893	75	968	1,067	84	1,151	971	112	1,083	2,199	139	2,338
October			0	920	53	973	906	87	993	1,529	89	1,618
November			0	775	35	810	993	42	1,035	1,162	71	1,233
December			0	703	36	739	845	25	870	898	42	940
January			0	625	41	666	908	27	935	546	27	573
February			0	602	19	621	1,205	55	1,260	787	41	828
March			0	774	12	786	845	57	902	872	125	997
Total	5,007	559	5,566	9,967	716	10683	12,791	1,210	14,001	15,643	994	16,637
April - Sept total				5,568	520	6,088	7,089	917	8,006	9,849	599	10,448

Appendix 3

Users – residents vs visitors

(In addition to the physical footfall are telephone and email enquiries)

Dates	Phone	Local	Other UK	Abroad	Total	% by phone	% local	% other UK	% Abroad
8-13 Dec	11	166	30	3	210	5.24	79.05	14.29	1.43
15-20 Dec	17	128	14	7	166	10.24	77.11	8.43	4.22
22-27 Dec	12	77	9	5	103	11.65	74.76	8.74	4.85
29 Dec - 3 Jan	7	116	6	9	138	5.07	84.06	4.35	6.52
5 - 10 Jan	12	138	6	18	174	6.90	79.31	3.45	10.34
12 -17 Jan	15	133	10	5	163	9.20	81.60	6.13	3.07
19-24 Jan	22	132	7	3	164	13.41	80.49	4.27	1.83
26 -31 Jan	13	135	9	13	170	7.65	79.41	5.29	7.65
2 - 7 Feb	23	107	27	1	158	14.56	67.72	17.09	0.63
9 -14 Feb	23	128	23	6	180	12.78	71.11	12.78	3.33
16 - 21 Feb	26	134	25	5	190	13.68	70.53	13.16	2.63
23 - 28 Feb									
2-7 March	16	123	37	1	177	9.04	69.49	20.90	0.56
9-14 March	21	288	49	7	365	5.75	78.90	13.42	1.92
16-21 March	18	160	35	1	214	8.41	74.77	16.36	0.47
23-28 March	30	151	31	1	213	14.08	70.89	14.55	0.47
30 March - 4 April	14	117	20	27	178	7.87	65.73	11.24	15.17
6-11 April	19	114	31	22	186	10.22	61.29	16.67	11.83
13-18 April	17	161	30	15	223	7.62	72.20	13.45	6.73
20-25 April	17	154	30	13	214	7.94	71.96	14.02	6.07
27 April - 2 May	18	132	26	17	193	9.33	68.39	13.47	8.81
4 - 9 May	20	116	32	14	182	10.99	63.74	17.58	7.69
11-16 May	29	123	41	27	220	13.18	55.91	18.64	12.27

18-23 May	35	114	39	12	200	17.50	57.00	19.50	6.00
25 - 30 May	24	93	27	15	159	15.09	58.49	16.98	9.43
1 - 6 June	15	150	41	15	221	6.79	67.87	18.55	6.79
8 - 13 June	11	116	18	17	162	6.79	71.60	11.11	10.49
15 - 20 June	29	137	47	6	219	13.24	62.56	21.46	2.74
22 - 27 June	24	187	66	27	304	7.89	61.51	21.71	8.88
29 June - 4 July	23	141	49	32	245	9.39	57.55	20.00	13.06
6 - 11 July	34	164	40	26	264	12.88	62.12	15.15	9.85
13 - 18 July	16	160	25	12	213	7.51	75.12	11.74	5.63
20 - 25 July	21	160	32	32	245	8.57	65.31	13.06	13.06
27 July - 1 August	14	206	41	30	291	4.81	70.79	14.09	10.31
3 - 8 August	17	190	39	35	281	6.05	67.62	13.88	12.46
10 - 15 August	22	152	49	31	254	8.66	59.84	19.29	12.20
17 - 22 August	31	242	25	42	340	9.12	71.18	7.35	12.35
24 - 29 August	26	310	52	19	407	6.39	76.17	12.78	4.67
31 August - 5 Sept	21	142	41	15	219	9.59	64.84	18.72	6.85
7 - 12 September	15	187	34	16	252	5.95	74.21	13.49	6.35
14 - 19 September	13	182	35	16	246	5.28	73.98	14.23	6.50
21 - 26 September	19	148	43	12	222	8.56	66.67	19.37	5.41
Totals	810	6214	1271	630	8925	9.08	69.62	14.24	7.06

Appendix 4

VIC Services

VIC service	Also provided at another outlet in Aylesbury town centre	Potential fit with another outlet in Aylesbury town centre	Other provision of service
Holiday information service	UK holidays (eg coach holidays, cottage breaks) provided by travel agents, such as Adams Travel. Destination specific brochures are not held. (eg Cornwall)	Unlikely to be a fit with another outlet as does not offer any income generation for the outlet	Online
National Express tickets	Post Office		Online
Theatre tokens	WHSmith / Waterstones / Waterside Theatre		Online
Event information	Library / pubs & cafes		Visit Aylesbury website / AVDC website / Visit Bucks website / Mix96 website
Local attractions and days out information	Library	Library to increase provision / Pubs and cafes	Visit Aylesbury website / Visit Bucks website
Local event tickets	Bucks County Museum (very occasionally)	Bucks County Museum expand offer / Waterside theatre / Queens Park Arts Centre	Potential for one of the local websites to provide online tickets sales
Local guides and leaflets	Library / various retailers & businesses	gateway entrance points (car parks, stations etc)	Visit Aylesbury website / Visit Bucks website
Local transport timetables	Bus and Train stations / Friars Square Shopping Centre	Library	Transport provider websites

Stamps	Post Office / supermarkets		
Photocopying and faxing facilities	Snappy Snaps / Aylesbury Study Centre		
Local crafts and gifts	Aylesbury markets / Queens Park Arts Centre	Independent retailers / Waterside theatre / Bucks County Museum	Potential for one of the local websites to provide online sales e.g. Visit Aylesbury
Aylesbury merchandise	Bucks County Museum (predominantly books and mugs)	Bucks County Museum expand offer / Waterside theatre / Queens Park Arts Centre / Library	Some merchandise available through national retailers including Aylesbury duck mug and tea towels & postcards depicting historic Aylesbury Potential for one of the local websites to provide online sales e.g. Visit Aylesbury

Appendix 5

Accommodation bookings

Type	2014/15	2013/14
Total local bookings	3	16
Total telephone bookings	1	5
Total bednights	41	49
Average bednight value	£31	£48
Value of total bednights	£1,287	£2,357