

Agenda Item 6

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Date	8 th March 2016		
Ward (s) affected	All	Key Decision	Yes
Subject	Tourist Information in Mole Valley.		
RECOMMENDATION			
<p>The Committee is invited to consider the issues raised in this report about the provision of tourist information in Mole Valley and express a view on what measures would be most appropriate to improve delivery of information about tourism attractions in the District.</p>			
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY			
<p>It was agreed by Council in November 2015 that the Scrutiny Committee should be asked to examine how tourist information is provided in Mole Valley and consider the scope for joint working with other organisations. This report summarises the background to the closure of the Tourist and Visitor Information facility that was operated from Dorking Halls up to 2009, explains how tourist information is currently provided by MVDC and other operators and sets out the issues and options for the future delivery of tourist information in Mole Valley for the Committee to consider.</p>			
CORPORATE PRIORITY OUTCOMES			
Environment			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect and enhance the natural and built environment and ensure our areas of natural beauty are well looked after. 			
Prosperity			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the culture and economy of the market town of Dorking. 			
Community Wellbeing			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the most of local cycling opportunities to support sustainable travel and support our rural economy while educating cyclists and other road users, and protecting residents and businesses from the impact of formal and informal cycling events. 			
<p>The provision of information to visitors and potential visitors to Mole Valley benefits the appreciation of the District's natural assets, highlights opportunities for outdoor activity</p>			

and helps encourage spending in local shops,

1. Introduction

1.1 At the meeting of Council on 24th November 2015 the following motion was proposed:

This Council notes:

- (1) That since tourist information centres and associated facilities were abandoned by MVDC some years ago, it has been much more difficult for tourists, visitors and residents to obtain information on the various events, activities and facilities available in the District.
- (2) That the re-provision of Tourist Information Centres would help boost the local economy and improve footfall in our town centres
- (3) That many market towns through out the country successfully support Tourist Information Centres in the town centres, and

resolves to examine, in consultation with the County Council, the Surrey, Leatherhead and Dorking Chambers of Commerce and other appropriate local organisations, the possibility of re-establishing Tourist Information Centres in Dorking and Leatherhead.

1.2 During the debate members raised a number of issues. Some supported the motion and felt that on-line tourist information is inadequate and that the Council has a role in encouraging and attracting visitors to the District by providing Tourist Information Centres. Other members took a different view and argued that visitor information was already available in Dorking Halls and at the HelpShop in Leatherhead and that a large amount of information was available on demand from the internet and social media which was usually most people's preferred information source. It was considered that working with businesses to help stimulate tourism would be more beneficial than providing Tourist Information Centres as there was no evidence that such provision would increase tourism in towns.

1.3 In the event, the motion was rejected after the Executive Member for Community Engagement and Resident Services had requested that a report in respect of the proposal to work with other organisations to examine tourist information provision be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

1.4 This report is the consequence of that decision and seeks to provide an over view of tourist information provision and the options for its delivery in Mole Valley.

2.0 History of MVDC's provision of tourist information and current arrangements.

2.1 Until 2009/10 a Tourist and Visitor Information facility was operated by MVDC as a discretionary service from the Dorking Halls. It was not an official Tourist Information Centre in the sense of being part of the Visit England network of TICs but was physically part of the main desk in the front of the Dorking Halls cloakrooms. It had leaflet racks and was manned six days a week in peak season and less at other times by dedicated Visitor Information staff, which were separate from the Dorking Halls box office staff. The Visitor Information staff were trained to Visit England TIC standards including the "Welcome to Excellence" package.

- 2.2 The Tourist and Visitor Information facility helped guide visitors and businesses to accommodation providers, restaurants and attractions in the locality. The facility's Manager represented Mole Valley at tourism groups such as Visit Surrey and Tourism South East events and training. MVDC contributed to the Visit Surrey annual brochure, Visit Surrey website and the bi-annual pan-Surrey Cambridge volume and value of tourism study.
- 2.3 In 2009 MVDC undertook a Business Process Review (BPR) of its services to establish whether they should continue to be provided, reduced or delivered in a different way. The BPR process included the Tourist and Visitor Information service. The review concluded that:
- (a) the service appeared to duplicate information from other services and information available through the internet which provided opportunities to research information about the area through a number of web sites and make on line bookings;
 - (b) the facility was providing a service for a limited audience which would continue to reduce with the development of digital information;
 - (c) some of the daily enquiries (around 20) could be handled by the Customer Services Unit (CSU) and through information on display in Pippbrook reception;
 - (d) it was difficult to quantify the value that the Tourist and Visitor Information service brought to the District in terms of increased business over the marketing which was already done by individual businesses.
- 2.3 The Executive therefore resolved not to continue the Tourist and Visitor Information facility in Dorking Halls; that some of the information provision should be provided by the Customer Services team and offered through a range of channels; and that as a discretionary service it should no longer receive the level of investment at the time.
- 2.4 Since closure of the facility MVDC has been running the Discover Dorking and Discover Leatherhead websites: Both sites generate traffic and are linked to the Surrey tourism website. Mole Valley's countryside attractions are featured on the Surrey Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty website and information about the District's wider tourism attractions can be found on websites such as TripAdvisor. The MVDC website also has an online calendar which organisers can populate for themselves to promote events. Residents can subscribe to receive local event information via the new MyAlerts service as well. The CSU also handles a number of tourism related enquiries.
- 2.5 MVDC displays visitor information in the reception area of Pippbrook. The CSU Team also populate leaflet racks at Leatherhead Institute and Leatherhead Leisure Centre with a variety of information, some which is tourist related. Tourist related information is also available at the Leatherhead HelpShop/Library.
- 3.0 Visitor Information provided by other organisations**
- 3.1 A survey of nearly forty premises across Mole Valley has been conducted to find out what visitor information is being provided by other organisations..
- 3.2 The display of visitor information in hotels, restaurants and cafes is very patchy and such information that is displayed includes attractions outside Mole Valley. In many cases no information is being provided at all.

- 3.3 Information about tourism attractions in the District is provided in Leatherhead Library and the HelpShop and in Dorking Library. Other facilities do display visitor information to a greater or lesser extent, including the Leatherhead Museum; Leatherhead Leisure Centre; Leatherhead Theatre; the Leatherhead Institute; Dorking Museum; the Dorking Halls and Dorking Sports Centre. Not all the visitor information provided at these locations is related specifically to attractions in Mole Valley.
- 3.4 Some of the larger attractions including Bocketts Farm and Denbies display information but it tends to be concentrated on their own leaflets and those of others with whom they are in partnership. The main National Trust venues also display information about the Trust's properties and some retail outlets in the countryside have visitor information racks.
- 3.5 Several premises that were visited indicated they would be prepared to display local visitor information but were rarely approached to do so.

4.0 Provision of tourism information in other areas of the region.

- 4.1 The web sites of other Surrey local authorities have been reviewed to get a feel for the information that is provided for anyone wishing to find out more about local attractions. The range of information available is variable and reflects the degree to which visitor opportunities are available in the area. Some of the Surrey authorities have pages dedicated to visitor information while others have only very limited amounts. Some have links to sites similar to Discover Dorking/Leatherhead which include a calendar of local events and also links to the Visit Surrey web site. Several of the local authority sites provide information about local walking trails.
- 4.2 Guildford is the only town in Surrey which has an officially networked Tourist Information Centre. This designation is dictated by size, opening times, location, staffing levels, staff training, and the range of services available. As a networked TIC it is subject to regular mystery shopping assessments.
- 4.3 There are limited tourist information facilities in some town council offices but very few towns comparable with Dorking and Leatherhead have dedicated tourist or visitor information centres unless they are in a recognised tourist hot spot.
- 4.4 Many larger towns in the region are closing their Tourist Information Centres. Worthing's was closed recently and those in Chichester and Lewes are under review. In general, where there is a visitor information facility in a market town, they are normally run by local Town Councils and often wholly or partially manned by volunteer staff.

5.0 Options going forward

- 5.1 The history of the tourist information facility in the Dorking Halls and experience elsewhere points away from the provision of manned tourist information centres in towns the size of Dorking and Leatherhead. The capital start up costs and subsequent on-going revenue costs have not been quantified and it would be difficult to estimate the benefits such a facility would bring to the area in terms of footfall to the towns such that a business case for a facility could be made.
- 5.2 Evidence would seem to show that consumers of tourist information are increasingly using digital platforms to source the information they require about the tourist attractions and opportunities in an area. The Visit Surrey, Discover Dorking

and Discover Leatherhead websites do generate traffic but it is recognised they need to be kept up to date and relevant. This will be an important aspect of the future work programme of the Economic Development Team.

- 5.3 There are other measures that MVDC could consider to promote the District's visitor attractions.
- Encourage larger tourism destinations in the District such as Denbies and Bocketts Farm to cross display leaflets from other providers.
 - Encourage other facilities including hotels, restaurants and cafes to be more proactive in displaying visitor information.
 - Introduce more tourist information in the Pipbrook reception.
 - Ensure Pipbrook and Dorking Halls front of house staff have access to up to date information about local attractions likely to be of interest to visitors and are able to deliver it through a range of channels.
 - Helping tourist based businesses get an on line presence through digital marketing courses.
- 5.4 It is also appreciated that leaflets displayed in hotels, visitor attractions and public venues remain popular and will continue to have a role in the promotion of tourist attractions.
- 5.5 There is also potential to work with other local stakeholders to look at what could be done over and above current practice to disseminate information about tourist attractions. These could include the Chambers of Commerce, local museums and the Surrey County Council library service.
- 5.6 None of these options would involve significant costs but are likely to be more than could be delivered by the existing budgets.
- 5.7 Looking ahead, if there is an appetite for a Business Improvement District (BID) in Dorking or Leatherhead, there could be scope to bring forward initiatives to increase visitor information by the BID Companies though their business plans if local businesses felt that by doing so it would help increase footfall and the vitality and viability of the town centres.

6.0 Issues to consider

- 6.1 In the light of the above, the Scrutiny Committee is invited to consider the following:
- Do visitors to Dorking and Leatherhead come on the off chance that there will be an attraction or information there about attractions? Or do they research on line beforehand and plan a visit to the area? What are the implications?
 - At a time when MVDC is having to make savings and taking account of the availability of easy access digital information about tourist attractions in Mole Valley, should consideration be given to providing a discretionary manned Tourist and Visitor Information facility in the District?
 - What more could be done to provide a service that meets the needs of those who do not use the internet to source information about tourist and visitor attractions?

- In the light of the suggestions in paragraph 5.3, how can MVDC work more closely with the tourist/visitor businesses in Mole Valley to promote the District's attractions in a way that adds value to the District's economy and enjoyment of visitors?
 - What is the scope to harness volunteers who would be prepared to be trained and deliver information about local attractions?
 - Are there lessons from other parts of the country that could be adapted for use in Mole Valley to increase visitor numbers in Dorking and Leatherhead, including through encouraging visitors to the District's countryside to visit the towns?
 - Is there more that could be done to improve signage to visitor attractions, bearing in mind Surrey County Council as highways authority would need to authorise any tourist signage placed on highway or pathways?
- 6.2 Whatever way forward is considered to be appropriate, it will be necessary to take into account the current initiatives to establish a Business Improvement District for Dorking and a Dorking Parish Council which if they come to fruition will become important partners in the delivery of facilities and services to promote Dorking. Equally, it will be important to work with representative groups in Leatherhead to maximise the opportunities to increase the towns visitor profile particularly in the light of the Transform Leatherhead initiative.
- 7 Financial Implications** – None directly at this stage but the implementation of initiatives to increase visitor information could result in increased costs depending on the nature of the measures put in place.

8 Legal Implications – None

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Monitoring Officer commentary

The Monitoring Officer is satisfied that all relevant legal implications have been taken into account.

S151 Officer commentary

The s151 officer confirms that all relevant financial implications and risks have been taken into account in this report.

Risk Implications

None directly as a result of this report.

Equalities Implications

The delivery of visitor related information must be accessible to all.

Employment Issues

None directly as a result of this report.

Consultation - None

Communications - None.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None