

Visitor Information Service	
Executive Summary	<p>A review was undertaken in December 2023 into the visitor information service operated by the Council and the options that exist for alternative service provision. The review looked at the opportunities for operating the service from alternative premises and also, providing it in conjunction with other external organisations.</p> <p>Having considered the available service options, and trends in how visitors access tourist information via smartphones and other devices and the closure of Visitor Information Centres by many local authorities around the country; it is not considered that these offer sufficient benefit or value for money for the Council. Ceasing the operation of the service will yield a significant financial saving and presents options for the future use of the building it currently occupies, thus generating rental income.</p>
Options considered	<p>A review was undertaken that considered a range of alternatives both for the service and for the building from which it operates, these included:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Outsourcing – not considered to yield sufficient immediate savings 2. Greater commercialisation - not considered to yield sufficient income to offset the costs 3. Delivery in partnership with an externally run facility – not considered to represent value for money 4. Replacing the service by digital provision – insufficient certainty about set up and future costs or benefits.
Consultation(s)	<p>The service review and subsequent draft business case that led to the recommendations in this report involved relevant staff from the following teams: Customer Services, Economic Growth, Estates, Finance and Human Resources. Its contents were also informed by input from the potential delivery partners.</p>
Recommendations	<p>The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is invited to comment on the issues involved for the Council if it were to cease provision of the tourist information centre, and how else the objectives of the service review might be achieved, so as to inform any decision which might subsequently be taken by Cabinet as part of the 2025/26 budget process.</p>
Reasons for recommendations	<p>To make financial savings from a service that is discretionary, considered to no longer to present value for money due to the changing way in which visitors access information and to generate additional income from the asset that would be vacated due to the termination of the service.</p>

Background papers	Background papers that informed the contents of this report include a service review and a business case for a potential alternative delivery model; these contain confidential information relating to staffing, budgets and commercially sensitive information.
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Wards affected	All in relation to the provision of the Visitor Information service but specifically Cromer in relation to the premises
Cabinet member(s)	Cllr Withington
Contact Officer	R Young

Links to key documents:

Corporate Plan:	<p>Investing in our Local Economy and Infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Continuing to promote North Norfolk’s diverse tourism and visitor offer”</i> <p>Action Plan 2024/25 <i>“Continue to support and work with Visit North Norfolk to promote North Norfolk as a key visitor destination with a diverse visitor offer”</i></p> <p>A strong responsible and accountable Council</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“We will ensure the Council maintains a financially sound position, seeking to make best use of its assets and staff resources, effective partnership working and maximising the opportunities of external funding and income.”</i> • <i>“Reviewing contract and partnership arrangements to ensure the most appropriate and efficient means of delivering services to our diverse communities and customers”</i> • <i>“Reviewing service delivery arrangements so as to realise efficiencies without compromising service standards and outcomes”</i> • <i>“Investigating the implementation of a Tourist Tax to finance the provision and maintenance of visitor infrastructure so that the costs do not fall directly on local Council Tax payers/making sure tourism pays for itself”</i> • <i>“Continuing a service improvement programme to ensure our services are delivered efficiently”</i> • <i>“Exploring opportunities to work further with stakeholders and partner organisations”</i> <p>Action Plan 2024/25 <i>“Review the Council’s approach to Asset Commercialisation to reflect the findings of the Corporate Peer Challenge in seeking to realise new and emerging opportunities around the use of the Council’s land and property assets through preparing a revised Asset Management Strategy by September 2024.”</i></p>
Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)	The recommendation of this report would yield a significant saving for the Council
Council Policies & Strategies	

Corporate Governance:	
Is this a key decision	No
Has the public interest test been applied	<p>The appendix to this report is to be treated as exempt for the following reason:</p> <p>Information in this appendix involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraphs 1,2 and 3, Part 1 of schedule 12A (as amended) to the Local Government Act 1972.</p> <p>These paragraphs relates to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Para 1. Information relating to any individual • Para 2. Information which is likely to reveal the identity of an individual • Para 3. Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) <p>The public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure for the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paragraphs 1 & 2: The appendix contains information relating to individuals at the Council and it is considered that disclosure of this information may have a prejudicial or detrimental impact. The privacy rights of such individuals outweigh the public interest in disclosure. • Paragraph 3: The appendix contains information which is commercially sensitive, relating to business information around assets and inventories. Releasing this information would be likely to have a prejudicial impact upon the Council.
Details of any previous decision(s) on this matter	None

1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1 This report relates to the provision of the Council's visitor information service, the North Norfolk Visitor Centre (NNVC) premises from which it operates and the alignment of the current or potential operating models with the Corporate Plan. It provides a recommendation on the future of the service and a summary of the alternative options that have been explored in reaching that.

2. Introduction & Background

- 2.1 The Council has provided a tourist information service for many years. Historically this had been undertaken from premises in several North Norfolk localities but in light of cost pressures and the changing way in which visitors accessed tourist information, the delivery of the service had changed over time through outsourcing, rationalisation and other means of provision. The service had therefore shrunk so that the only remaining District-wide Tourist Information Centre (TIC) is at the North Norfolk Visitor Centre (NNVC) at the Meadow Car Park in Cromer. Other TICs in the District operate from Mundesley (voluntary/community provision), Holt (Holt Town Council), and Wells-next-the-Sea (provided by Wells Maltings trust). The former Sheringham TIC, previously provided by NNDC, was until recently operated by the North Norfolk Railway under an agreement that essentially outsourced the service; however, the provision of the service terminated following the expiry of the Service Level Agreement (SLA) in 2022.
- 2.2 It is considered that the visitor information service is expensive in comparison to the benefits it brings and that as a non-statutory service, opportunities should be taken to reduce the cost. Many other visitor destinations have reviewed their role in providing TICs, with many choosing to combine the provision with other visitor attractions, providing static or video displays, moving visitor information to a digital platform or ceasing provision altogether.
- 2.3 A review was undertaken of the Council's visitor information service and the premises from which it operates – the North Norfolk Visitor Centre. The review considered all relevant costs and issues and evaluated options for different methods of service delivery, including terminating the service. A business case for a possible alternative (partnership) delivery model with the Norfolk Museums Service was explored, which contemplated the service being delivered from the reception of Cromer Museum; this was considered to involve significant compromises and remain costly to the Council and is therefore not recommended on the basis of value for money. The Council is working in partnership with the Museums Service in relation to 'coastal change' initiatives.
- 2.4 The net cost of providing the service and wider financial challenges faced by the Council are the key factors influencing the officer recommendation.

3. Proposals and Options

- 3.1 The service review had the following objective:
To identify ways of realising savings and/or generating additional income from the visitor information service.
- 3.2 This report summarises the most suitable options for achieving that objective and sets out the rationale for the recommendation to cease provision of the service altogether.

Current service provision

- 3.3 The Visitor Information Service caters for a wide range of visitor needs. Visitors engage with the service through various channels, primarily visits to the NNVC, but also by phone calls, emails, and social media, from people seeking information on events, accommodations, transport, attractions, walks, and

other activities. Staff operating from the NNVC provide a friendly and enthusiastic reception to visitors to the area, and the centre is designed to create a fulfilling and engaging experience. In addition to reactive communications, staff initiate monthly email newsletters and frequently post out information to potential visitors.

- 3.4 The opening (and hence staffing) hours for the NNVC in 2023/4 are as follows:
Summer: 15 May to 10 Sept Winter: 11 Sept to 12 May
Mon to Sat: 10am to 5pm Mon to Sun: 10am to 4pm
Sun: 10am to 4pm
- 3.5 Apart from providing traditional information services – principally display racks, printed literature and face-to-face interaction - the centre plays host to the Deep History Coast (DHC) Discovery Centre, showcasing the region's rich historical heritage through displays and videos. The team at the NNVC also facilitate National Express bookings and they issue the keys to visitors who have made beach hut bookings.
- 3.6 Sales of souvenir merchandise, largely featuring North Norfolk, DHC or Cromer branding, help offset some of the costs; the net sales income, however, is not significant.
- 3.7 The service has very limited links to other NNDC services or delivery partners (e.g. open space/country parks, events, destination marketing, Everyone Active, Open Wide, business support etc.)
- 3.8 The number of visitors to the centre is measured by manually 'clicking' people in and is recorded on a monthly basis. The total number of visitors in 2023 was 82,854 (varying from 14,755 in August to just 2,140 in December that year). Whilst the centre is located in Cromer, it is intended to provide information about the entire destination of North Norfolk.
- 3.9 There are very few broad destinations, such as North Norfolk, that have retained a physical information service of this kind. Many such destinations have moved over to a Tourist/Visitor Information Point (TIP/VIP) offer (which is not staffed), whilst most of those that do still offer staffed facilities, tend to co-locate them with popular venues, attractions or facilities. TICs are still prevalent in national parks or specific themed locations, such as nature reserves historic buildings, parks etc. (especially where messages seeking to guide visitor behaviour or interpret the special features of the area are deemed important), or at pay-to-enter attractions, and they exist in certain narrower geographical locations, e.g. towns and cities where facilities are concentrated, and visitor numbers are high.
- 3.10 Whilst the visitor economy (VE) is by far the biggest sector in North Norfolk (latest data (2023) suggested the District welcomed a total of 9,432,400 visitors, providing a total value of £519,653,378 and supporting an estimated total employment of 11,779 jobs), there is little to suggest how the TIC in Cromer contributes towards that. Fundamentally, it is a service for visitors on their arrival in Cromer, it is unlikely to play a role in attracting them (although it could be argued that the DHC as a brand, together with the installations and video display at the NNVC, does play some role in that).

Budget

- 3.11 Analysis of the budget for the current financial year (2023/24), showed the total cost as £169,382 (after deducting budgeted income but including internal support services costs of £61,050), showing a potential saving of £105,681 (were the service to cease). Depending on the future lease arrangements of the building, certain minor property related costs would remain. It should be noted that all figures used are taken from the budget figures, not actual expenditure/income. The breakdown of the budget for 2023/24 and the financial analysis of the saving potential is set out in the tables in Appendix 1.

Premises (*North Norfolk Visitor Centre*)

- 3.12 The building is located at the Meadow Car Park, Cromer, adjacent to the public conveniences and 'changing places' facility. The floor area of the NNVC is 109.83 m² (excluding the public conveniences and the lobby); the footprint of the whole building is 239.64m².
- 3.13 Due to its location, design and condition, the building would lend itself to a variety of alternative uses and there are no restrictive covenants preventing alternative use of the building or the use of the adjacent paved areas for concessions or extensions. The following should be noted
- Planning permission for change of use may be required, depending on proposed use
 - If external concessions are being considered, they too may require planning consent and would need suitable services (e.g., electricity and water) to maximise the rental value and minimise noise pollution/emissions from generators etc.
 - Electricity appears to be on a single bill - sub-meters could be fitted to ensure the units are billed separately
 - Heating serves the whole building via underfloor heating
 - There is a shared lobby, that would be very difficult to segregate (costs include cleaning, automatic door maintenance, window cleaning, decoration, general wear and tear) so a service charge would need to be levied in addition to the rent for the premises.

Options reviewed

- 3.14 The review of the service considered alternative ways in which it might be delivered differently; it also considered different locations from which it might be delivered and also opportunities for the existing building to be used in other ways. The principal options are summarised below, with a commentary about each.

Outsourcing

- 3.15 Enquiries were made of certain external organisations that were considered as likely candidates for operating the information service, along the lines of the existing model. Whilst it was considered possible to introduce a more commercial approach to delivering the service, the costs of the service were considered to be too high to make this a realistic option for an external organisation, without significant levels of subsidy being provided by the Council. This option was therefore discounted as it would not achieve the objective of significantly reducing the cost of the service to the Council. It would not yield sufficient immediate savings and would expose to Council to uncertain levels of service and potential risks in the medium term, were it not to succeed.

Greater commercialisation

- 3.16 The service has been operating in its current form for many years and the budget position has scarcely changed. Operating in the manner it has been, relies on relatively high levels of staffing. Due to the limited footprint, and because, as currently designed, the premises has little space for storing retail goods, there is reduced opportunity for diversification from its traditional format. Much of the internal space is taken up with displays and racks of leaflets, with only minimal sales opportunity; the external space surrounding the building has not been well designed for trading outlets (potentially operated by concessions), however, it is adjacent to Cromer's small weekly market. The limitations on the premises therefore constrain the opportunities to yield sufficient income to offset the significant existing service costs; in addition to which, the Council does not have the necessary experience of running a retail type operation that might generate and the necessary levels of income or profit to the Council.

Delivery in partnership with an externally run facility

- 3.17 A number of councils operate TICs alongside other facilities, and indeed, this has been done in North Norfolk previously in the case of the North Norfolk Railway in Sheringham and at Wells Maltings (an arrangement that continues, with the goodwill of Wells Maltings Trust, at no cost to the Council). The service operated at the NNVC could be provided in collaboration with other facilities, although the Council does not have a prominent role in any of these, in which case some form of incentive would be required in order for a partnership arrangement to work.
- 3.18 Given that the service is district/destination wide, an accessible central location is considered essential. Having reviewed options, officers explored the opportunity for the service to operate from the reception at Cromer Museum, a facility operated by Norfolk County Council. The business case for such an option was explored in some depth but given the likely costs and compromises that would be deemed necessary in order for this to work, the option was unable to achieve the objective of significantly reducing the cost of the service; nor would it provide co-benefits for the museum without extensive subsidy from the Council.
- 3.19 Alternative visitor information provision opportunities may exist within other Council owned assets, such as Cromer Pier. Should closure of the existing facility be agreed, the Council will be open to ideas/options presented by its tenants and/or service delivery partners.

Replacing the service by digital provision

- 3.20 A number of local authorities across the country have changed their TIC service away from a physical service to one which is self-serving, for example with static displays and interactive screens, or just a virtual offer, e.g. via an app. This could be done within North Norfolk (or beyond) as a means of spreading the locations from which visitor information is available, potentially siting 'tourist information points' (TIPs) at attractions and popular locations. This would not rely on a fixed place and time, therefore freeing up the NNVC premises and staffing, whilst enabling a 365-day, 24/7 access to information. The very traditional model by which the TIC has operated however, doesn't respond well

to the trend in visitor information. At the time the centre was refurbished and transformed into the DHC discovery centre, a DHC app was also developed. The app has proven to be relatively popular, and has been kept operational, however there is little to suggest what the levels of demand (or the benefits) for an expansion of this to wider visitor information might be. Obviously major tech companies, such as Google and Tripadvisor, provide extensive information about all destinations, including user generated content (UGC). There is little point in competing with these popular online services; however, it should be accepted that such provision does not meet the needs of people who are not able to, or choose not to, rely on on-line content. A local in-situ model could be developed – perhaps using interactive screens - but the costs and benefits of doing so are difficult to predict. Insufficient certainty exists about set up and future costs or benefits of this service model, however, if it were deemed to become a beneficial way of delivering the service, and funding was available (perhaps via grants), it could be considered at a later date. This does not impact on the options for the future use of the NNVC premises at present.

4. Corporate Priorities

- 4.1 Various elements of the Corporate Plan and Annual Action Plan relate to matters addressed in this report. These are quoted below.

Investing in our Local Economy and Infrastructure:

- *“Continuing to promote North Norfolk’s diverse tourism and visitor offer”*

Action Plan 2024/25

“Continue to support and work with Visit North Norfolk to promote North Norfolk as a key visitor destination with a diverse visitor offer”

A strong responsible and accountable Council

- *“We will ensure the Council maintains a financially sound position, seeking to make best use of its assets and staff resources, effective partnership working and maximising the opportunities of external funding and income.”*
- *“Reviewing contract and partnership arrangements to ensure the most appropriate and efficient means of delivering services to our diverse communities and customers”*
- *“Reviewing service delivery arrangements so as to realise efficiencies without compromising service standards and outcomes”*
- *“Investigating the implementation of a Tourist Tax to finance the provision and maintenance of visitor infrastructure so that the costs do not fall directly on local Council Tax payers/making sure tourism pays for itself”*
- *“Continuing a service improvement programme to ensure our services are delivered efficiently”*
- *“Exploring opportunities to work further with stakeholders and partner organisations”*

Action Plan 2024/25

“Review the Council’s approach to Asset Commercialisation to reflect the findings of the Corporate Peer Challenge in seeking to realise new and emerging opportunities around the use of the Council’s land and property assets through preparing a revised Asset Management Strategy by September 2024.”

5. Financial and Resource Implications

- 5.2 The net annual revenue saving from the proposed approach amounts to £129,321 against the existing budget for the service. This is made up of:
- reduction in staffing and related costs
 - reduction in property related costs for the existing premises
 - income from letting the existing premises (based on the professional advice of the Council’s Estates and Asset Strategy Manager, having regard to comparable premises).
- 5.3 The existing budget breakdown is set out in Appendix 1, together with the breakdown of the projected savings.
- 5.4 The proposal would be enacted as part of the service review process. Redundancy costs are indicated in table 2 of Appendix 1
- 5.5 Matters relating to the lease of the existing property would involve staff in the Council’s Estates and Legal teams.

Comments from the S151 Officer:

The Council are required to set a balanced budget for 2025/26. The revenue savings from the proposed approach of £129,321 will help to close the £1.8million budget shortfall the Council is currently facing.

6. Legal Implications

- 6.1 The recommended approach is not believed to give rise to the need for any specific legal issues. The lease of the existing premises to a third party will be led by the Council’s Estates team and any redundancy procedures would be led by the Council’s HR team.

Comments from the Monitoring Officer

Whilst no legal issues are identified at this stage, Eastlaw are available to provide advice and assistance as may be needed.

7. Risks

- 7.1 Risks principally relate to reputational matters, caused by the loss of a service and DHC assets that visitors, relevant local businesses and some residents might value. A carefully conceived and well executed communications strategy will be necessary in order to mitigate the reputational harm.

8. Net Zero Target

- 8.1 The recommended approach will not alter the overall emissions for which the Council is responsible, however, it will shift emissions from scope 2 (electricity used by the Council directly) to scope 3 (electricity used by tenants of Council premises).

9. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

- 9.1 No relevant matters arise from the contents of this report

10. Community Safety issues

- 10.1 No relevant matters arise from the contents of this report

11. Conclusion and Recommendations

- 11.1 There is clearly an opportunity to reduce the cost of the visitor information service; its delivery in the current form is considered to be anachronistic and expensive. Alternative methods of delivering the service (as is) have been evaluated and are not considered to provide value for money for the Council, nor to yield other overriding benefits. Alternative means of providing visitor information will continue to be explored, together with partner organisations and other interested parties.
- 11.2 The existing NNVC premises could be let in order to provide on-going income to the Council. Alternative (Council-related) uses for the building are not considered to be of sufficient benefit in relation to the loss of income to which this would give rise.
- 11.3 **The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is invited to comment on the issues involved for the Council if it were to cease provision of the tourist information centre, and how else the objectives of the service review might be achieved, so as to inform any decision which might subsequently be taken by Cabinet as part of the 2025/26 budget process.**