

**URN:** 21-054

**Subject:** Positioning the Borough as a Visitor Destination

**Report to:** Policy and Resources 13<sup>th</sup> July 2021

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report sets out proposals to position the borough as an all-year round destination for visitors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflecting on the changing pattern of how visitors access resort information over the last three years.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**That Committee resolves to:**

- a) **Note the content of this report and the proposed new operating model for the provision of visitor/tourism information.**
- b) **Support the principles contained in this report to move to online and telephony visitor information services supplemented by COVID Marshals in the interim whilst in a pandemic, and longer term via a blend of seasonal 'Hosts', Heritage Guides and Street Wardens.**
- c) **Confirm the continued closure of the Tourist Information Centre and request the Head of Property Services brings forward an options appraisal to re-purpose the building in a manner that will support the local leisure or hospitality sectors.**

## 1.0 CONTEXT

- 1.1 The borough of Great Yarmouth as a tourism destination remains hugely popular attracting over 1 million overnight trips and 6.8 million day trips in 2019. The industry was valued at almost £650 million in the same year and supported 37% of local jobs. In changing times, UK holiday destinations need to be able to continue to appeal to visitors looking to book holidays, weekends away and day trips out before they leave home. Visitors looking for something different or being attracted by the lure of a leisure experience, sun and sand or an out-of-season relaxing break tend to do their research online and book via Online Travel Agencies or by telephone directly with their chosen accommodation or attraction. Many holiday makers have been coming to their chosen resort and their preferred accommodation provider on numerous occasions in-year and each year. What sets an excellent visitor destination apart from a crowded market of destinations to choose from however, is looking after people once they've arrived in their chosen place.
- 1.2 This report sets out proposals to position the borough as an all-year round destination for visitors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflecting on the changing pattern of how visitors access resort information over the last three years. Before, during and post pandemic, the UK holiday destinations have had to adapt to a rapidly changing social, environmental and economic impacts on tourism. Whilst the hospitality sector in the borough continues to do well overall compared to other UK coastal destinations, there is no getting away from the fact that the sector and indeed the visitor market has changed.

- 1.3 The Great Yarmouth Town Centre Partnership (TCP) and the Greater Yarmouth Tourism and Business Improvement Area (GYTABIA), are not-for-profit Business Improvement District companies; the former looking after the interests of some 220 businesses located in Great Yarmouth town centre; the latter being the borough-wide Destination Management Organisation. Both BIDs have adapted their respective information advice and support services for their levy payers in the last eighteen months. Together working strategically with the council, the three entities continue to respond to the pandemic. Social distancing measures, COVID-safe messaging and ensuring visitors have access to up to date information both in person and digitally online as well as a warm and friendly welcome when staying, holidaying and taking days out in the borough's resort is more important than ever.

## 2.0 CONSUMER ACCESS TO VISITOR INFORMATION

- 2.1 The developments in both consumer access to and use of technology is having a transformative effect on the future of the domestic visitor economy and leisure tourism. Overall internet access continues to grow, and the impact of COVID-19 has accelerated digital adoption. The use of technology to work, play, and stay connected now shapes new digital habits and visitor experiences.
- 2.2 This unprecedented level of access to information has revolutionised the way consumers research, book and manage their holidays and wider leisure time. Perhaps the most significant change in the last five years has been the emergence of the mobile internet revolution (smart phones) which make on-the-go access to real-time immediate information part of everyday life and an enhancement to the actual tourism experience. The latter expectation depends on reliable access to the internet or use of mobile data bundles while on holiday or visiting a place. Hence one of the reasons for the recent investment made, via GoTrade, in a free Wi-Fi service in Great Yarmouth town centre and upgraded digital technology within the CCTV system which now provides additional data metrics to be captured.
- 2.3 Consumers are more and more ready and able to interact directly with businesses and brands and vice versa. Social media is driving another shift in consumer attitudes to leisure; namely the fear of missing out or 'FOMO'. The ease with which people can share their leisure activities both with people they know and with people they don't know increases exposure to different experiences and provides a route to promote the visitor economy. Overall, this positive trend for tourism can be used to increase the visitor's desire for different activities and broaden the awareness of things to do, places to visit overall.
- 2.4 During the decade there has been a reduction in the number of physical on-street Tourist Information Centres with Ipswich, Hunstanton and most recently Norwich, changing their visitor information offer and closing their Tourist Information Centres. One reason for the decline is the increase in digital engagement and availability of online booking platforms for accommodation, attractions and venues. This is evidenced through a sharp reduction in attraction ticket sales and commission income for the Great Yarmouth Tourist Information Centre in recent years (prior to the pandemic).
- 2.5 Whilst tourism is a non-statutory service, it is most certainly a key sector for local employment and underpins the resurgence of arts, culture, heritage together with positioning the borough as a destination for people wishing to access breath-taking beaches, parks and other natural landscapes.
- 2.6 Hence the Council working with both BID company partners, which together represent almost 1,000 businesses across the borough, is proposing to change the operating model by investing in visitor information services that are can provide access to local visitor information both online and face-to-

face going forward.

- 2.7 As part of the UK's recovery journey, now is the time to reset, pivot, and think differently to transform the borough's tourism and visitor information offer to match new digital expectations whilst still providing a personal on-the-go information service.

### 3.0 VISITOR INFORMATION SERVICES GOING FORWARD

- 3.1 As the tourism and hospitality sector reshapes its offer, the following markers form the basis of exemplar visitor information services:

**Brand and Online Content** - establish a clear brand and concentration on quality of information and on design of materials. In the context of the borough, GYTABIA has adopted the customer-facing name 'Visit Great Yarmouth' and in partnership with the Borough Council, a new-look website so-named is now in place: <https://www.visitgreatyarmouth.co.uk/>

**On-street Information** - Positioning the local knowledge of people at the heart of the offer, via on-street regular and seasonal staff acting as 'Wardens or 'Hosts', easily identifiable, approachable and trained to provide information and advice to visitors. In the case of Great Yarmouth, this would be provided by a combination of Tourist Assistants, Street Wardens, COVID Marshals, and Heritage Walk Guides.

**Ambassadors of the Place** - Being open to every opportunity to network and promote all that the borough has to offer. 'Ambassadors' for the local area. Locally the Council proposes to establish an advocate Ambassador Programme.

- 3.2 During the first national Lockdown, the staff from the Tourist Information Centre were redeployed to other areas of the council to assist with the Council's community response to the pandemic. This included making outbound telephone calls for residents self-isolating or shielding. They also provided a back-office telephony and email service for visitor enquiries from May 2020 onwards and this level of visitor information and advice has been maintained to date.
- 3.3 Data analytics and online tracking demonstrates that there is a high level of digital engagement for all Great Yarmouth has to offer to visitor audiences. Between 2017 and 2019 the number of people visiting the old tourism website increased by 50% (equating to over 600,000 more visitors). Mobile devices are the most common method used to access the website, accounting for 54% of users in 2019, and just under 57% of visitors to the site were in the Great Yarmouth locality and surrounding areas. This indicates people accessing online visitor information whilst in the geographic area.
- 3.4 This change in customer behaviour from physical engagement to digital interaction, signifies a need for the Council and BID partners to respond by ensuring the right skills and capacity are available to provide an excellent digital experience.
- 3.5 It is therefore proposed to move to this new operating model for the provision of visitor and tourist information as opposed to re-opening the traditional Tourist Information Centre. The new Visit Great Yarmouth website is now 'live' and will be further expanded and developed over time informed by GYTABIA and its Destination Marketing Organisation sub-group. Back office staff resources will continue to be deployed to respond to enquiries via social media, by email and via telephone calls. Additionally, the Council's reception in the Town Hall will be open to visitors and residents alike.

- 3.6 Up until March 2020, at the onset of the pandemic, Great Yarmouth's tourism information offer focused on a website, which required modernisation given the age of the software deployed, and a Tourist Information Centre located in Maritime House, a 3-story Grade II listed building on Marine Parade operated by a team of 4 council staff (2 full time and 2 part time seasonal staff) supported by the Tourism Manager. The building is under-utilised and is in a prime location for another hospitality-related retail, training or leisure venture. With the changing social norms described above, footfall had reduced over recent years with 18% less visitors between 2018 and 2019, and a decrease of 21% of people approaching the counter itself. Commission from ticket sales and stock sales has also dropped 52% between the 2017/18 season and 2019/20 season; meaning the net cost to operate a TIC was £92, 075 in 2019/20 (actual costs for 12-month operation).
- 3.7 Coupled with a growing demand for online content, many other local authorities have closed their physical provision and invested in broadening their online channels of communication and access to information.
- 3.8 The borough's Tourist Information Centre was closed in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, financial comparisons have been made with 2019/20 when the centre was open. In 2020/21 the centre was due to operate for seven months of the year (April to October) and remain closed during the winter season (November to March) in order to generate a saving of £44,141 on its annual net actual £92,075 operating cost in 2019/20. However, due to the lack of space to adequately social distance, the Centre has remained closed. As the staff were redeployed to assist with the COVID response, this saving was not realised in its entirety.

#### **4.0 VISITOR INFORMATION - ON-STREET & BACK OFFICE**

- 4.1 As part of Norfolk Public Health's response to the pandemic, funding was made available to districts to put in place a cohort of up to 10 FTE staff. In the borough of Great Yarmouth those staff are known as COVID Marshals and they work in pairs across the borough supplemented by the TCP BID's Street Wardens in Great Yarmouth town centre. The COVID Marshals have been extremely successful in providing a visible physical uniformed presence on-street throughout the borough to advise businesses and the public on social distancing and reinforcing the #StaySafe message. This has enabled an increased level of engagement with businesses who the Marshals advise and support in terms of reopening and trading safely. The Marshal team has enabled greater engagement with the general public - residents and visitors included. For example, Marshals are able to speak with people in towns and villages about simple and effective COVID safe measures. They have also supported health partners at Vaccination Centres and Lateral Flow Testing locations.
- 4.2 An extension of the current funding for COVID Marshals now means the Council can continue to deploy COVID Marshals for the remainder of 2021 which includes the traditional summer tourism season. Given the public information and advice role of the Marshals and their presence on-street, there is an opportunity to evolve that role to provide general advice and guidance to the public, including tourists and general visitor information.
- 4.3 This would link-in with the proposed Ambassadors Programme for Great Yarmouth, explained below, with Marshals becoming some of the first Ambassadors for the borough, enabling them to provide exciting information to residents and visitor about the cultural and tourism offerings available as well as the amazing future projects coming to Great Yarmouth.

- 4.4 Offering a physical, out and about presence including ‘pop up’ information points, through COVID Marshals as Ambassadors enables them to be not only more visible to visitors but also businesses, resulting in higher levels of engagement.

## **5.0 AMBASSADOR PROGRAMME**

- 5.1 Members are aware that Great Yarmouth is a diverse, forward thinking, dynamic place, with the future development for its residents, economy and visitors at its heart. Great Yarmouth Borough Council and its key partners across the borough have worked tirelessly to shape the future of the borough, identifying and prioritising the key issues and how best to improve for the future. Through meaningful research and stakeholder engagement, the Council has created powerful strategies to transform the future of the borough and has secured significant funding to deliver these inspirational plans.
- 5.2 The proposed Ambassador Programme aims to take an active role in educating and inspiring the local business, industry, visitors and residents on the importance of the broader tourism/visitor economy for their town and borough. Building strong relationships and trust with the borough’s key stakeholder groups helps maintain resources, improves the visitor experience and can help activate opportunities in the value chain and hospitality-related businesses.
- 5.3 With over £220 million of public sector investment now allocated to regenerate the borough over the next three to four years, from Heritage Action Zone, Future High Streets Funding and Town Deal funding, there is a strong desire to ensure that engagement is consistent and far reaching through the delivery of key projects, maintaining the interest and excitement of key stakeholders, residents, visitors, businesses and communities all the way through to completion.
- 5.4 The setting-up of an active Ambassador Programme will support residents, businesses and visitors to be part of the exciting developments taking place and be proud of how the borough is shaping up for the future. There is already excellent engagement work taking place but there is also an opportunity to build on this engagement and enhance it through a new proposed Great Yarmouth Ambassador Programme. These advocates or ‘Ambassadors’ can be from a variety of industries, sectors, and communities representing the demographics of our community.

## 6.0 FINANCIAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The overall budgeted cost of operating existing tourist information centre for 2021/22 is £47,630 for the staffing resource, within the council's marketing service. The council also provides online visitor information and responds to telephone enquiries. This broader support totals £107,053 (e.g. software and staffing).
- 6.2 The building's running costs for Maritime House totaling £48,196 per annum have not been included in the figures above. It is important to note that the council will need to continue to allow for the costs of the building pending further reviews of the use of the asset. These will continue to be incurred until an alternative commercial use can be identified and implemented. The full financial impact of options for the use of the building will be outlined in future reporting.
- 6.3 Should members support the direction of travel set out in this report, there will be an opportunity to re-purpose the existing building which houses the Tourist Information Centre within the Council's portfolio of assets. Whilst a full options appraisal would follow-on from the outcome of this report, there have been several approaches made to the Council commercially to acquire or lease parts of the building. Other options would also be explored including retention of Maritime House as a hospitality training facility and conference/gallery space.
- 6.4 Closure of a physical Tourist Information Centre and utilising a blend of staff resources will require a consultation with current members of the Tourist Information Centre. Changing to a different operating model will allow a review of the resources required to deliver the proposed new operating model for visitor and tourism information.

## 7.0 RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The risks and mitigations of re-positioning the borough's access to visitor information are set out in the table below:

Risk	Mitigation
Position of the borough as a visitor/holiday destination diminishes.	The Council working with GYTABIA as the Destination Management Organisation will ensure investment is undertaken in online media content, as well as press and media relations to maintain the name of Great Yarmouth on the national and regional scene.
Not all visitors have access to online information.	It is estimated that 80% of visitors have some form of access to online information. For those unable to digitally interact, there remains the option of receiving tourist information via a telephone call, via the Town Hall reception or via an on-street 'Hosts' deployed seasonally.
Risk that visitors may not plan ahead and struggle when in Great Yarmouth to navigate their trip.	Enhanced online offer encouraging planning ahead. Telephony and email advice available. On-site advice and guidance available from the Town Hall.

## 8.0 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The Council works closely with the Town Centre Partnership (TCP) and Greater Yarmouth Tourism and Business Improvement Area (GYTABIA) to promote and market the resorts in the borough as part of an all-year-round place to visit as 'destinations' with their own unique identities under the new Visit Great Yarmouth brand.
- 8.2 The landscape of tourist information is evolving, with digital trends emerging more heavily since the start of COVID-19. Closure of the building and redeploying establishment costs will ensure Great Yarmouth's digital presence is maximised. The current TIC offering comes at a substantial cost to the council, and a decrease in revenue has resulted in an increased deficit in recent years. Through working smarter and utilising a blend of staff resources, including COVID Marshals as Ambassadors, existing establishment costs can be redeployed to ensure digital presence is maximised, enabling existing marketing staff to concentrate on further commercial/revenue streams. There is a need to maintain a level of phone and email coverage, which can be managed through existing resources including weekend cover during the season.
- 8.3 Maritime House offers the opportunity for a new revenue stream through being re-purposed for commercial use. The options set-out in this report provide a realistic proposition to develop the council's strategic support to the tourism sector and aligns with the operational delivery of tourism destination marketing undertaken by GYTABIA.

## 9.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

Area for consideration	Comment
Monitoring Officer Consultation:	Yes
Section 151 Officer Consultation:	Yes
Existing Policies:	Great Yarmouth Borough Council Corporate Plan 2020-2024 Culture, Heritage and Tourism Strategy July 2020 GYTABIA (Visit Great Yarmouth) Destination Management Plan 2021
Financial Implications:	Yes
Legal Implications (including human rights):	None
Risk Implications:	As set out in section 7.
Equality Issues/EQIA assessment:	Yes
Crime & Disorder:	N/A
Every Child Matters:	N/A