

CABINET

Urgent Business Report Seven Day per Week Opening of Morecambe Visitor Information Centre – Trial Period

Report of Head of Economic Development and Tourism

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To seek the Cabinet Member's approval for extending the operating hours of the Morecambe VIC to 7 days per week as a trial period during the shoulder seasons (spring and autumn) of 2009.

Key Decision

Non-Key Decision

√

Referral from Cabinet
Member

Date Included in Forward Plan

N/A

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (1) To approve the opening of the Morecambe VIC for 7 days per week as a trial period during April and May, 2009, and during October and November, 2009.
- (2) That a further report is produced at the end of the trial to consider the feasibility of further extending the 7 days per week operation of Morecambe VIC from the spring of 2010 onwards.
- (3) That the Overview & Scrutiny Chairman be consulted with a view to waiving call in, in accordance with Overview & Scrutiny Procedure Rule 17, to enable immediate implementation.

1.0 Introduction

The issue of 7 day per week opening for the Morecambe VIC has been looked at following a request at the Cabinet and MP liaison meeting on 21st April, 2008. The original request was to consider the possibility of Sunday opening throughout the whole year and not just during the summer months. However, it was clear that the financial implications of this would be likely to require budget growth. It is therefore proposed that an initial trial period of extended opening is undertaken to assess the levels of demand and income generation, during the "shoulder" months of the season in April and May, 2009, and the following October and November.

2.0 Proposal Details

Morecambe VIC currently opens for 21 Sundays per year, during the summer season and is open for 6 days per year for the remainder of the year. It operates with 1 member of City Council staff and 1 City Council manager (37 hours, Mon-Fri), supplemented by 2 County Council Assistants. The County staff work from Monday to Saturday but not on Sundays.

A Service Level Agreement is in place with Lancashire County Council and the availability of their two staff is essential to the operation of the Morecambe VIC.

The option of closing on weekdays to support Sunday opening has been examined but existing contracts and income levels would not support mid-week closure.

A permanent (experienced) member of staff must be on duty at weekends as they have the responsibility for opening, closing, cashing up, supervision of Casual Assistants, etc. The cost of Sunday opening can be minimised by restricting opening hours to 4 hours, avoiding the need for lunchtime supervisory cover, but the staff would need to work for 5 hours as ½ hour each side of the opening time will be required for opening/closing duties, e.g. stock checking and cashing up.

For the trial period, it is proposed to open for 13 additional Sundays, commencing one week after Easter on 26th April (the VIC is already open for the 3 bank Holiday Sundays in the spring). There would be 4 additional Sundays in the spring and 9 in the autumn shoulder periods (October-November).

The cost of opening on these Sundays will be partially offset by sales and merchandise income, but the levels of income are difficult to predict in advance of the trial. Customer spending patterns are difficult to estimate as there are a number of factors that need to be taken into account including weather, events, etc.

At present, it is not certain whether anticipated additional income would cover the additional staffing and running costs. However, as a temporary arrangement during the pilot these extra costs can be met from the existing Morecambe VIC overtime budget. It would also be possible to end the trial early in the autumn period if income levels were proving too low.

In order to provide sufficient staffing for the additional Sundays, one of the Casual Assistants would need to be upgraded, on a temporary basis, to act as a TIC Assistant.

The trial period will allow the full implications of the costs, income and service to the public to be assessed to allow an informed decision to be made about the feasibility of extending 7 day per week opening into 2010. It is possible that one outcome of the trial would be to demonstrate that extended opening in spring (i.e. between Easter and the start of the summer season) could be supported within existing budgets.

3.0 Details of Consultation

Discussed within the Service, with Financial Services and with the Portfolio Holder.

4.0 Options and Options Analysis (including risk assessment)

Option 1 - Do Nothing. It would be possible to retain the existing opening hours and incur no additional staffing costs but this would result in the VIC remaining closed to visitors on Sundays out of the main season. Any excess overtime budget could also be considered as a small recurring saving during the 2010/11 budget process.

Option 2 - Open for a trial period during the “shoulder” months of the season, as outlined in the report. This would offer an improved service to visitors and allow for levels of demand and potential income generation to be assessed, for both spring and autumn months. An informed decision could then be made about the feasibility of extending 7 day opening further in subsequent years

Option 3 – Undertake a more limited extension to the current seasonal opening by opening for the four additional Sundays between Easter and the main season only. This would minimise cost and risk as these dates are likely to have higher levels of demand than the autumn months. It is possible that this could demonstrate that extended spring opening could be continued in future years within existing budgets, which in itself would be a significant service improvement. However, it would not provide a sufficient level of evidence to assess the feasibility of full-year Sunday opening.

5.0 Officer Preferred Option (and comments)

The preferred option is option 2 as this would provide additional service to the public and visitors during the spring and autumn of 2009 and would allow for the success of the additional Sunday opening to be assessed, including analysis of visitor demand and income generation. It would then allow for an assessment to be made of the financial implications of continued 7 day per week opening of Morecambe VIC into the future. Opening of the Morecambe VIC on Spring Sundays could also result in positive publicity for the start of the 2009 holiday season.

Option 3 (extended spring opening only, between Easter and the main season) would still be beneficial if option 2 is not supported and it would be a valuable exercise to test the possibility of repeating this exercise in future years within existing budgets.

6.0 Conclusion

It is recommended that the Morecambe VIC be allowed to open for 4 hours per Sunday for a trial period in the spring and autumn of 2009, and that the feasibility of extending Sunday opening in future years is assessed at that point.

RELATIONSHIP TO POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Tourism Strategy for Morecambe, Lancaster and the Lune Valley, 2006 – 2010, approved in June, 2006. Strategic Objective 3 is, “To provide high quality visitor services which exceed customer expectations”. Opening for additional days will help to meet the target of increasing visitor enquiries by 5% annually.

CONCLUSION OF IMPACT ASSESSMENT

(including Diversity, Human Rights, Community Safety, Sustainability and Rural Proofing)

None.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

It would be preferable to complete the trial period using existing staff who will be asked to volunteer to work the additional Sunday hours. This may involve temporary upgrading of a Casual Assistant to the role of TIC Assistant due to the nature of the duties. If this did not prove to be possible, an additional TIC Assistant would need to be employed on a temporary basis to cover the additional Sundays during the trial period. This is not considered to be a realistic alternative however, given that this is a trial and it may be necessary to curtail the activity early.

The staffing costs for opening on 13 additional Sundays for both trial periods are based on the top of scale SCP 11-15, the current scale paid to TIC Assistants plus one Casual TIC Assistant who would be paid at SCP 10. The TIC Assistant may also be responsible for the security of the whole Platform building as well as the VIC on Sundays when no Platform staff are on duty.

The costs for the trial period have been calculated as £400 for the additional staffing and running costs during the spring and £900 for the autumn trial period. This pays for 1 TIC Assistant for 5 hours per day and 1 Casual TIC Assistant for 5 hours per day, heating and lighting.

The additional staffing and running costs will be offset with an expected additional income (net cost of sales) of approximately £300 during the spring and £700 for the autumn period. These figures have been calculated based on an average percentage of actual income from Sundays opened during 2008.

The estimated net cost for the above therefore are:

Spring - £100

Autumn - £200

As mentioned in the body of the report should a budget shortfall occur, then this will be met by Morecambe VIC's existing overtime budget. The pilot will need to be monitored closely to ensure that existing budget provision is not exceeded and ended early if necessary.

If the trial period is successful the cost of opening on Sundays all year would have to be assessed. The suggested trial period covers the spring, when customer demand is expected to be reasonably high, and the autumn which can be quiet and especially weather dependant. Income is expected to be less in October and November than in the spring months. Whilst the trial would not provide information about income levels in Winter, it can be assumed that this will be very low and this can be factored into any assessment of the feasibility of extending 7 day opening all year round without requiring further trial opening.

Should option 3 be agreed instead, although it may be possible to determine whether opening throughout spring and summer will be cost neutral or result in additional net income, it will not provide enough information to determine whether opening all year round will be sustainable, i.e. the shoulder months cover the winter months. For information the projected net additional cost of option 3 is £100.

Regardless of whether option 2 or 3 is recommended a follow up report to Cabinet will be required before additional Sunday opening is rolled out on a permanent basis, i.e. ranging from additional opening during spring only, spring and autumn or all year round. Subject to whether there are any additional budget growth requirements this may also need to be fed into the 2010/11 Budget process.

SECTION 151 OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The S151 Officer has been consulted and has no comments to add.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

None

MONITORING OFFICER'S COMMENTS

The Monitoring Officer has been consulted and has no comments to add.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

Contact Officer: Jim Trotman

Telephone: 01524 582811

E-mail: jtrotman@lancaster.gov.uk

Ref: