

Review of Local Information Centres

Service Manager: Tim Cook, Area Development Team Lead (East)
Lead Officer: Tim Cook, Area Development Team Lead (East)
Contact Details: tim.cook@southsomerset.gov.uk (01963) 435088

Purpose of the Report

To update members on the review of Local Information Centres.

Public Interest

The Area East Committee gives funding support to the three town councils to assist with the running costs of local information centres (LICs) in Bruton, Wincanton & Castle Cary. This report gives details of the review of the Local Information Centres and potential development of the service.

Recommendation

1. To note and comment on the progress made towards supporting and developing strong, locally run Local Information Centres.
2. To endorse the approach to standardise the LIC provision in Market Towns.

Background

A review of SSDC satellite offices was completed in spring 2010 and an improvement plan put in place with a programme of improvements for the area and community offices across the district. Part of these proposals was to recognise that Local Information Centres should be under Town Council management to enable increased hours of operation supported by local resident volunteers and backed by an annual District Council service level agreement of £500 per LIC.

Members received an update on the performance of the three LICs in Area East at the meeting of the committee in March 2017. The report identified inconsistencies in the way the LIC services were delivered and in the operating statistics.

Review Methodology

Details of the Service Level Agreements and performance statistics for all LICs in South Somerset have been compared to try to identify the elements of good practice that lead to successful service delivery. A meeting of officers has taken place to discuss the support needs of each LIC and the input of Area Development and other organisations.

Findings of the review

The LIC service is valued and needed. However, there are currently inconsistencies in the services delivered at LICs across the district. The principle that each LIC should reflect the local situation and tailor services to meet local need is a positive thing and should be supported. However, people should be able to recognise an SSDC supported LIC and should expect to be able to access consistent services.

All LICs provide an open and accessible space for people to drop in and pick up leaflets on a range of subjects. The space is staffed during opening hours by a mix of paid staff (Town Clerk or Deputy) and

volunteers. Offices opening times vary with some open for up to 7 hrs per day, 6 days per week at peak times and others only open for 3 hours per day, four days per week. Some Town Councils have been more successful than others at recruiting volunteers. There appears to be a link between LICs with the highest footfall and levels of volunteer support.

Services available also vary but visitors to a town should be able to find out about how to access local services such as toilets, parks, food & drink, transport etc. Information about events and attractions should be available and it should be possible to buy tickets for local events.

Minimum Standards

It is desirable to agree a set of service principles and minimum standards in order to ensure that funding is allocated in a fair way.

Available services

As a minimum, LIC's will provide the following services:-

- Ticket sales/Event promotion
- Welcome Pack
- B&Bs/Accommodation list
- List of clubs and groups (possibly linked to welcome pack)
- Up to date posters/leaflets
- Access to the internet

Opening hours

It is not thought to be possible or desirable to standardise opening hours. However, in order to ensure fairness in terms of funding, it is suggested that LIC's are open for a minimum of 5 hours per day, 5 days per week during the summer. This will not be possible immediately for some and will require time to work towards this.

Support for volunteers

Some LICs have recruited a good pool of volunteers but this is not the case for all. The need for some support to help councils recruit and manage volunteers was identified and initial contact has been made with SPARK to discuss provision of some support. It has been suggested that it would be beneficial to provide a half day networking/reward day at a local tourist attraction. This should happen annually and be built into the SLAs.

SLA

SSDC has up to date agreements are with Town Councils with the exception of Ilminster which is run by a separate organisation. It was felt that the arrangement should be with the Town Council. The management of the LIC could be delegated or sub-contracted to a separate group but the Town Council would still be accountable for the contract/SLA.

The effectiveness of the online presence of our market towns has been assessed through the MTIG digital audit work. It is hoped that recommendations can be incorporated in this review.

Future funding

It is considered that the standard £500 received by all towns with an active LIC is the right level of funding. However, the working group identified a range of other support that the LICs require including training and equipment.

Financial Implications

Historically a total of £1,500, has been allocated within the Members Discretionary Budget for Local Information Centre provision (£500 per LIC). It is suggested that the £1,500 allocation for LIC's is preserved but is only available to Town Councils that commit to deliver the minimum requirements.

Corporate Priority Implications

Focus two: Environment

Focus four: Health & Communities

Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications

None

Equality and Diversity Implications

The SSDC Area East Development Team considers all aspect of equalities in evaluating funding support. Supporting an accessible face to face, locally run LIC, with the ability to refer vulnerable people to the community office for additional support, is complementary to SSDC run customer access services.

Background Papers:

File with SLA.
