**HEREFORD CITY COUNCIL**

**COUNCIL MEETING 20th October 2015**

**TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE**

**Background**

1.1 The closure of the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) in King Street has attracted a lot of criticism especially during Three Choirs week when the premises were taken over by the organisers of the festival but no other tourist information was available. The closure was part of a general contraction of services by Visit Herefordshire which included the bed room browser publicity effort for museums and other attractions, the leaflet swap event and the Flavours of Herefordshire food festival, all of which were cancelled this year.

1.2 When Herefordshire Council handed over tourism promotion to Visit Herefordshire it did so in the hope that a service based on a commercial model would become self-financing, which has not proved to be a viable proposition in the county. TIC’s have been closed in market towns and where they have reopened this has bene by a combination of local volunteers with resources provided by the parish (town) councils. It is clear that Herefordshire Council does not intend to seek to recover the situation in Hereford with direct expenditure.

1.3 Visit Herefordshire has now been absorbed into the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce, which has run Visit Worcestershire for some time. Visit Worcestershire is a free standing body supported by the City Council, although it should be noted that Worcester City Council is a district council with both a substantially greater budget than Hereford City Council, and of course many other calls on it services. Visit Worcester does maintain a visible tourist information service within that city using a mixture of public sector funding, volunteer time and contributions in kind, revenues from advertising and sales of guides, souvenirs etc and sponsorship.

1.4 Since the closure there has been a lot of discussion at the Hereford Tourism Group and in many other places about the need for a physical presence to promote tourism within the city. Many people come to Hereford because of the Cathedral and need to be aware of the many other opportunities to visit and explore while they are here. Whilst there is general agreement that this is absolutely necessary to support the tourist/visitor economy within the City no-one has put forward a complete and funded package which would enable a new service to be launched. What is needed is one agency to take a lead in providing start-up funding and a willingness to take a commercial risk as to what revenues might be generated to support running costs in the future.

1.5 At this stage there is much that is not known. Various locations for a TIC in Hereford have been suggested, no one site is obviously preferable. The option of using the Old House is almost certainly not viable as space there is very restricted and the need to preserve without any alteration the appearance of the listed building makes it impossible to advertise the TIC, which defeats the objective of it being a highly visible service. Possible shared space with the redeveloped library is also unlikely to proceed given the space needs of the new service delivery hub which is intended to be located there once the asbestos removal and other renovation works are completed. Various shop fronts have been suggested as have other sites.

1.6 The potential revenue raising capacity of a TIC is also unknown. Guides, maps and souvenirs could be sold from such a venue and local craft producers could bid for space to sell their wares in due course. It is unlikely that such ventures would cover running costs entirely and if the Council is minded to take this function on it may well be that it will be a continuing revenue cost.

**2. Proposal**

2.1 Noting that the Council has substantial reserves and some unspent balances within budgets this year too, it is possible to provide start-up funding for renting a suitable site, fitting it out and providing at least one member of staff, possibly part-time. It remains to be seen whether it would be viable to open the TIC, and therefore employ someone, all year round. The staff member could be supported by volunteers but there may be a need for additional part-time staff.

2.2 The detailed work of costing a proposal, agreeing a lease, identifying staffing costs and working all of these factors into the budget (as well as establishing what calls will be made on reserves during the first year of operation) are matters for Finance and Policy Committee. There is insufficient information at present to be proscriptive about these matters. The purpose of the following recommendations is to give the Council as a whole the opportunity to approve the allocation of funds and officer time to developing a TIC to open in time for next year’s tourist season and to make a clear statement that the Council is willing to undertake this responsibility going forward.

**3. Recommendations**

**3.1 That Council agrees that a TIC for Hereford is absolutely necessary to support the visitor and tourist economy.**

**3.2 That the Finance and Policy Committee be tasked with identifying appropriate funds to be used to support a start-up cost of up to £60,000 in 2016-2017, and to use reserves or underspent resources in the revenue budget in 2015-2016 if expenditure towards the project is necessary during the current year.**

**3.3 That the Finance and Policy Committee reviews projected revenues generated by the TIC when further data is available and incorporates these into forward planning for budgets in subsequent years, with the intention that the TIC will not be supported from reserves for more than one year.**

Steve Kerry

Town Clerk