

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Subject: FALKIRK TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE
Meeting: ENVIRONMENT & HERITAGE COMMITTEE
Date: 18TH SEPTEMBER 2007
Author: DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 VisitScotland operates a network of Tourist Information Centres (TICs) in Scotland, including the TIC in Glebe Street, Falkirk. It provides all-year-round services to visitors in the area and has operated from this location for over 10 years.
- 1.2 Falkirk Council has a Joint Working Agreement with VisitScotland and makes a financial contribution towards VisitScotland services (including the provision of tourist information). In addition to the Falkirk TIC, VisitScotland operates a seasonal TIC in Bo'ness. This was relocated in 2006 to Bo'ness station.
- 1.3 Under the Joint Working Agreement, both parties recognise the need to make the provision of visitor information appropriate for a changing tourism market. VisitScotland has now put forward a proposal which includes relocating its principal Falkirk information outlet to The Falkirk Wheel. This report explains the proposal and the reasons behind it.

2.0 VISITOR INFORMATION PROPOSALS

- 2.1 The Falkirk TIC provides visitor information and an accommodation booking service. It also retails a range of products. In common with many other TICs in Scotland, the number of visitor enquiries has been declining in recent years. This is principally a result of internet usage. Visitors can very readily access information, book accommodation and buy other products and services directly from tourism operators without going through an information centre or agency.
- 2.2 While TIC usage has tended to decline for the reason stated, research shows that many tourists value personal contact with information staff. Face-to-face contact with local experts can provide a very high quality of service which enhances the visitor experience and benefits the area.
- 2.3 VisitScotland has conducted a national information and sales review and is in the process of implementing value-for-money solutions for the provision of TICs and related services. In the Falkirk area, it considers that The Falkirk Wheel is the location which offers the best location for a tourist information centre
- 2.4 The Falkirk Wheel has quickly established itself as one of Scotland's top tourist attractions, with over 400,000 visitors per annum. A TIC at the Wheel could "capture"

this large volume of visitors. While the existing TIC offers an excellent facility, it has fewer than 30,000 enquiries per annum. A TIC at The Falkirk Wheel could serve many more visitors and thereby be more efficient and effective. In particular, it would be in a good position to tell visitors about other things to do and see in the area, including visiting the town centre, and encourage them to extend their stay in Falkirk.

- 2.5 Following discussions with British Waterways, VisitScotland has developed a proposal for establishing a TIC at The Falkirk Wheel. It would be located in the foyer of the Falkirk Wheel Visitor Centre. It would be permanently staffed by VisitScotland, fitted out with displays and leaflet racking and offer the same services as are currently available in Glebe Street. VisitScotland's proposed arrangements with British Waterways would secure these premises for TIC operation for 5 years initially.
- 2.6 Falkirk town centre remains an important tourist destination. The costs of TIC operations are such that having a TIC at the Wheel and retaining the present facility is not considered a realistic or viable option. It is suggested that town centre visitor needs could continue to be addressed by establishing a tourist information point consisting of a touch-screen electronic kiosk and/or leaflet racks and other displays, but without the substantial staffing and property costs of a stand-alone TIC.
- 2.7 A suitable location for such a facility is currently being investigated and a location within or close to The Steeple Box Office is being considered. It is proposed to progress these investigations in tandem with the plan to move the TIC to the Falkirk Wheel.
- 2.8 Under the proposals, the cost of moving the TIC and operating it at the Wheel would be fully met by VisitScotland as part of its normal operations. VisitScotland staff would transfer to the new TIC and no redundancies are envisaged.
- 2.9 The costs of establishing a tourist information point in the town centre would be additional to the present Operating and Management Agreement and the Council would be required to make a contribution. The main cost is likely to be an electronic touch screen facility, estimated at £7,000 plus installation. This could be met from existing Economic Development budgets.
- 2.10 VisitScotland hope to commence the process of moving to the Falkirk Wheel at an early date in order to take advantage of a forthcoming break in their current lease arrangements in Glebe Street, to ensure the new facilities are fully bedded in for the 2008 season and to get the advantages of improved efficiency and effectiveness as soon as possible.

3.0 CONCLUSION

- 3.1 Tourism in Falkirk has expanded and changed considerably in recent years. The volume of visitors at The Falkirk Wheel presents a major opportunity for VisitScotland to reach its target market in this area while the existing TIC is unable to generate growth in visitor enquiries. The proposal to move the TIC to the Wheel, in conjunction with establishing an unstaffed information point in the town centre, is considered a viable and effective response to the changing tourism market.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Policy

None. The proposals are consistent the Area Tourism Strategy action to develop information provision at strategic gateways.

4.2 Legal

None.

4.3 Financial

The TIC costs would be met by VisitScotland. Any Council contribution to the information point would be met from within existing Economic Development budgets.

4.4 Personnel

None. VisitScotland employs the staff of the TIC.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 It is recommended that Committee:-

- (i) notes the content of this report;**
- (ii) agrees that the Director of Community Services should work with VisitScotland to implement the above plan to move the TIC to the Falkirk Wheel and establish an information point in the town centre; and**
- (iii) receives an update/progress report in due course.**

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Director of Community Services

4th September 2007

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LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

Nil.

