

Centres of excellence

VisitEngland's Visitor Information Manager, *Tracey Taylor*, explains how Tourist Information Centres can help raise awareness of local businesses and generate sales

Tourist Information Centres (TICs) – or Visitor Information Centres as they are often known – have experienced a challenging time over the past few years. Many have closed or had their budgets cut by the public agencies which typically finance them. However, there are still 400 visitor centres in England, which welcomed 33 million people in 2012. They handle an estimated 20.5 million enquiries a year – the majority (86%) being face to face – and they offer a warm welcome to visitors.

In addition to being a great source of information and ideas for visitors, their role as a useful platform for local business promotion is possibly less well known. Many visitor centres support local tourism businesses by encouraging longer stays and greater spend.

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So, are you in touch with your local visitor centre? Do you know who the manager is and what they can offer to your business?

While the support available for business promotion can vary widely between

different visitor centres, Giles Adams, publisher of *What's On Somerset*, believes many visitor centres are switched on to social media

“Visitor centres have possibly been undervalued of late but those that remain are really quite engaged with social media and follow very astutely the rules of social media engagement – >



Barbara Hunt, Manager of the Royal Windsor Information Centre, says that getting in touch with the centres can be very worthwhile.

“Frequently located in central locations, visitor centres are great places to advertise. The staff answer a myriad of questions and can promote established and new businesses to visitors and local residents alike.

“In Windsor and Maidenhead, in addition to poster and leaflet space, we offer website listings, smartphone application listings (iApp) and, of course, promotion via social media. We communicate with our stakeholders by business e-newsletter and hold sector meetings to keep businesses up to date with local trends and events.

“We work closely with all sectors of the industry, have a concierge service for local hotels and act as box office for many events and attractions. Information centres that are merely ‘nice people with leaflets’ are a thing of the past; we are here to promote your services and work closely with you.”



The 10 participating pilots

Beverley
Bridlington
Durham
English Riviera (Torquay)
Liverpool
Morecambe
Once Brewed (Northumberland National Park)
Peterborough
Rye
Sheffield
Get in touch to be part of this initiative.

> you really feel there is a person at the other end. In a way, many of them are on the button all the time.”

“TICs are especially valuable to companies that don’t have large marketing budgets”

There is an opportunity for tourism operators to make contact with visitor centre staff and keep them supplied with information. Tourism businesses that are proactive in making contact are most likely to secure the potential benefits.

According to Catherine Esbester at Ginger Fig Gifts and Gallery, Taunton, once a relationship is formed with your local visitor centre it can be fruitful. “We do not benefit from a strong high-street presence but the local Tourist Information Centre is very proactive

in pointing visitors who want to experience shopping in the area towards our business.”



The future of visitor information

In recognition of an ever-increasing number of mobile device users, VisitEngland launched a new pilot project in June – in partnership with Twitter – focusing on developing the in-destination visitor experience through the provision of responsive, real-time visitor information. Latest research from @ResearchNowUK reveals that Twitter users like to use the social media platform while on holiday, with 46% looking for local information and one in four seeking restaurant recommendations.

The project aims to reposition visitor centres as a central platform from which small businesses can target visitors, bringing the local offer directly to their mobile devices.

The ten information centres participating in the pilot project will be given best practice guidance and support to broaden their reach and help local businesses to share their announcements, offers, updates and reasons to visit. The project aims to demonstrate the difference a modern, digital destination can make to the local economy.

The pilots will run for six months and a final report will be shared with industry partners at the beginning of next year. The report will identify opportunities for information providers to develop their digital capabilities, share their knowledge with consumers, and help businesses and local areas to deliver great tourism experiences. ■

Gail Archer is Manager at Swadlincote Tourist Information Centre, which offers support for local tourism operators

“TICs are especially valuable to companies that don’t have large marketing budgets or online profiles – smaller businesses, farm diversifications and new starts.

“That’s not just attractions and accommodation providers, but also retailers, event organisers and food and drink operators. Often when starting out they are new to the tourism sector and have limited funds available for marketing. We can promote their business directly to potential customers.

“Our relationship with business owners in the sector means we are well placed to advise them of initiatives and activities from which they could benefit. We can highlight opportunities to work with quality organisations and local destination marketing campaigns – in our case the National Forest & Beyond – where for a small fee they can become part of a much larger promotional campaign that will reach many more people than they could alone. We can also point businesses towards other assistance, such as grants, advice and training.”