



Overview Scrutiny Committee

Gravesham Gateway: Topic Review

Report – September 2016

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Foreword

Given the challenging financial times facing the council, the Overview Scrutiny Committee felt that it would be prudent to review the Gravesham Gateway.

The Gateway partnership was formed in December 2010 between Gravesham Borough Council (GBC) and Kent County Council (KCC) to deliver a Gateway provision (access to a wide range of public and voluntary services under one roof) from the Civic Centre.

The Gateway model is currently under review by KCC and property costs, in particular, are a key area of focus. Whilst formal discussions are yet to be held, it is likely that KCC will be looking at alternative delivery models. If KCC wish to review the property arrangements and cease the current arrangement, GBC would lose significant rental income from KCC, although general desk rental to partners could continue with GBC retaining 100% of the income.

In the light of this information, the review sub-group examined the current Gateway model and identified potential improvements combined with considerable financial savings for the council as a whole.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the officers involved in the review for their time and assistance in providing comprehensive information which has enabled Members to discuss, debate and identify potential improvements for consideration.

Cllr David Hurley
Chair of the Sub-group

Cllr John Burden
Vice-chair of the Sub-group

1. Introduction and Summary of Recommendations

1.1 As part of its adopted work programme for the 2015-19 period, the Overview Scrutiny Committee selected the subject of Gravesham Gateway for a topic review. The terms of reference for the review focused on :

- Analysing the current Gravesham Gateway model in order to identify improvements and financial savings for the council as a whole.
- Identifying and scrutinising the following areas:
 - The aims and objectives of the Gateway
 - The performance of the Gateway
 - The role of KCC in the Gateway
 - Current and future partners of the Gateway
 - Running costs of the Gateway
 - Potential Savings

Throughout the review, Members of the sub-group have been provided with a significant amount of information to review and analyse relating to the Gravesham Gateway, and this has prompted the specific area of investigation the review has ultimately focused on.

Summary of Recommendations

1.2 In summary, the Scrutiny topic review of Gravesham Gateway has identified the following recommendation for Cabinet consideration:

Recommendation

In consideration of the facilities available to the Customer Services/Gateway area of the Civic Centre, it is recommended that the council changes the way in which it delivers its tourism function and related services (as detailed in the report).

Specifically this would see the closure of the existing TownCentric facility and that the council's Customer Service Welcome Desk be extended to accommodate a new tourism function, accompanied by a review of the various related tourism services in regards to their on-going financial sustainability.

1.3 The detailed information to support these recommendations is held within the body of this report and referenced above.

2. Executive summary

This executive summary is intended to provide an overview of the potential options available for the future model of the council's tourism service and the associated implications for staff and the council's budgetary position.

Corporate policy

There is no statutory requirement for Local Authorities to provide tourist or visitor information services, nor to 'twin' with other towns or carry out town twinning activities.

Gravesham's Corporate Plan 2015-19 objectives include, under Strategic Objective 2: Stronger Gravesham: *"Promote Gravesham's cultural and heritage offer, through initiatives such as helping raise funds to bring back a museum in Gravesend."*

TownCentric overview

The tourism function is predominately delivered through the Gravesham Tourist Information Centre, TownCentric, which is currently based within the town centre within a unit in Gravesend's St George's Centre. The unit is leased from Queenridge Properties Ltd and although the lease expired in September 2011, the council is 'holding over' on this arrangement. In terms of contractual obligations, the lease can be terminated on three months' notice.

The current opening hours for TownCentric are:

- Summer (April -September) – 7 days a week (9am - 5pm, 10am - 4pm Sundays and Bank Holidays).
- Winter (October -March) – 6 days a week (9am to 4pm), Monday to Saturday.

The direct net cost of tourism and the TownCentric Tourist Information Centre is budgeted at £150,000 in 2016-17, of which premises related expenses payable have been budgeted for at £51,870. In addition to the services provided by the TownCentric premises, there is also tourism information provided on the council's website and a separate website platform.

Tourism services

The three main areas of operation provided by the council's Tourism service are:

- **Tourist information service:** located at Gravesend's Visitor Centre at TownCentric. Service includes: visitor information enquiries (local and further afield), retail, e.g. souvenirs, books, maps, gifts, etc.), and bookings (coach, events, etc.), meeting and exhibition space and a 'Shopmobility' service.
- **Tourism development:** working with local visitor attractions and accommodation to develop the visitor 'product' in the borough, guided walks, tours, etc.; tourism promotion via the <http://www.visitgravesend.co.uk/> website and Destination Management System; joint working with Visit Kent and Tourism South East.
- **Town Twinning:** Co-ordination of Town Twinning programme and communication with twin towns.

On review of the evidence provided by officers in this review, Members of the sub-group determined that the council should change the way in which it delivers its tourism function and consider the financial viability of its related services. The details on how such a change could be delivered in practical terms is set out in section 3 to this report.

3. Review findings

TownCentric services

The core services currently delivered by TownCentric are set out below.

- Visitor Information Services

The TownCentric building is open seven days a week (including Bank Holidays) April to September and six days a week October to March with varying opening hours dependant on the time of year. Visitor book comments are all positive and demonstrate that the service offers a welcoming experience to customers looking for information on the surrounding area.

TownCentric, both in person and via the 'visitgravesend' website, actively promote the local tourism sector, primarily by way of advertising the variety of opportunities open to visitors to the borough;

- Leaflets are distributed to local accommodation providers, attractions, pubs & restaurants, libraries, the Civic Centre, and Rochester Tourist Information Centre (TIC). The annual visitor guide is the most comprehensive publication designed and circulated.
- Local events are also promoted via www.gravesham.gov.uk, www.visitgravesend.co.uk, www.visitkent.co.uk, www.wherecanwego.com and the Gravesham & Medway Life magazine.
- Advice and promotional material relating to the five hotels and bed and breakfast accommodation currently available in the borough.

Additionally TownCentric provides a supporting role to the tourism industry itself, actively working with existing businesses in the various accredited assessment schemes (e.g. National Star Ratings) and also helping facilitate the expansion of businesses through its '[Standards Charter](#)' which acts as a platform for start-up businesses.

This support role is underpinned by TownCentric's agreement with Visit Kent. The agreement provides service sector expertise, including site visits, to prospective new businesses about the local market and conditions for consideration. Equally the agreement offers guidance to existing business in regards to improving standards.

Using visitor numbers provided by TownCentric it is possible to establish a cost per site visit calculation as presented by the Table below;

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
	£s	£s	£s	£s	£s
Total Net Expenditure	239,441	241,198	234,541	256,618	239,105
Visitor Numbers	32,025	34,011	28,177	32,963	35,334
Cost / visit	7.48	7.09	8.32	7.79	6.77

- Managed Bookings

All bookings for coaches, boat trips, walks and talks are currently taken by telephone or face to face with the customer.

Coach bookings are offered as an additional service to customers, with TownCentric acting as an agent and receiving commission on each booking taken. In almost all cases the customer could book the services they require direct with the operator and potentially secure a cheaper price booking online.

In 2015/16 the number of administered coach bookings (National Express and Chalkwell) by TownCentric was 644, generating commission of £2,719.34.

NOTE: Further analysis is required to identify the costs/income generated by this activity - to be provided as part of the full Economic Development and Town Centre service review.

- Boat Trips

Boat trips on a number of different vessels are sold from TownCentric. In previous years the council has hired a vessel and sold tickets to cover the cost of the hire, on most occasions a small surplus has been achieved. In recent years this model has been altered to be commission based where any ticket sale achieves a small commission with an element of risk being passed onto the boat operator.

In 2015/16 the number of administered boat trip bookings was 160, generating commission of £813.55.

NOTE: Further analysis is required to identify the costs/income generated by this activity - to be provided as part of the full Economic Development and Town Centre service review.

- Talks/Walks

A programme of Talks/Walks, with various themes, is also coordinated in conjunction with local historians and other guest speakers. Most of these events are started or held within TownCentric and have been relatively successful.

In 2015/16 the council administered the following;

- Talks/Walks – 294, generating commission of £720.35

- Guided Walks and Tours bookings – 412, generating commission of £952.50

NOTE: Further analysis is required to identify the costs/income generated by this activity - to be provided as part of the full Economic Development and Town Centre service review.

- Audio Tours –Talking the Walk

'Talking the Walk' was an audio project developed by the council involving the New Tavern Fort, Milton Chantry and a walking tour of the Town and Riverside area. Users are given an audio guide of their preferred area of interest. The tours were designed to give visitors an engaging and interactive experience with informative commentaries including versions specifically for children.

Funding of just under £50,000 was secured for the project from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) with all costs for the first few years being covered within this funding.

In 2015/16 the council administered 20 Audio Tours and the total income generated was £87.

NOTE: Further analysis is required to identify the costs/income generated by this activity - to be provided as part of the full Economic Development and Town Centre service review.

- Retail

Retail sales are an element of goods and services provided at TownCentric and vary from books, cards to general souvenirs.

In 2015/16 the net profit generated by TownCentric from retail sales was £3,996.22.
NOTE: Further analysis is required to identify the costs/income generated by this activity - to be provided as part of the full Economic Development and Town Centre service review.

- Shop mobility service

The shop mobility service is operated from the TownCentric building with all initial registrations being carried out by TownCentric staff. This provides a service to shoppers coming into the town and is currently operated without charge to the customer, although many users choose to make a donation. The number of monthly uses is consistent with 251 users overall in 2015/16. On average 2 or 3 new registrations are made per month.

It is recognised that the provision of a mobility scheme within the Town creates a positive contribution to equalities (enabling those with disabilities to access services within the Town). Furthermore it is considered that, as the Civic Centre has extensive facilities to assist customer access, and is assessed to ensure it complies with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), this service could be administered from the Civic.

- Meeting and exhibition space

TownCentric also offers rooms to hire for meetings, talks, workshops, exhibitions. Charges depend on the person/organisation hiring the premises and the length and frequency of the bookings. Exhibitors are charged at a flat rate per day for the whole bay at the end of the centre.

In 2015/16 the council received eight bookings (some of which are block bookings) generating income of £1,295.

- Town twinning

The town twinning project has been established for over 30 years and, alongside the cultural and social links the project continues to develop, twinning helps to create the opportunity for economic development as networks are developed in the respective local business communities.

Gravesham is twinned with Neumunster in Germany (1980); Cambrai in France (1989); Chesterfield County in Virginia, USA (2005); and Jalhandar in India (2011). The TownCentric manager plays a lead role in facilitating arrangements which are structured around 'formal' Civic visits to and from each twinning partner and 'informal' visits under the auspices of the Gravesham Town Twinning Association and/or by individuals. These activities are then followed by work to raise the profile of the business opportunities through the local business community via the council's business networking and the hosting of events; e.g. 'Doing Business in India' event delivered with the UK India Business Council.

Advice for local businesses on establishing business links through the town twinning arrangements, and wider business advice on other international opportunities, is provided via the support network available on the council's webpage;

<http://www.gravesham.gov.uk/services/business/business-support-services/support-and-advice/international-business-support>

It is considered that these activities could be administered by a Civic Centre relocation.

Changing the delivery model – key considerations

Operational

The Visitor Information Team currently has a Full Time Equivalent establishment of 4.3 officers and consists of a Visitor Manager, one full time Visitor Information Officer, two part-time Visitor Information Officers and a Business Administration Apprentice.

The team is also supported by two casual employees who occasionally help cover any weekend shifts and annual leave. There is cleaning support of 12 hours each week.

Relocation to the Gateway/Civic Centre will require a review of the availability hours of operation of the service, particularly in respect of operation at the weekend and Bank Holidays. Additional resilience and the presence of other staff may enable staffing to be reduced as lone working will not be an issue. Generally, there is a growing emphasis on the availability of visitor information online which may for many customers compensate for any reduction in the service.

Customer Services/Gravesham Gateway

The current meet and greet operation within the Gateway consists of 2 officers covering Monday to Friday 09:00 – 17:00; x 1Gravesham Borough Council officer and x 1Kent County officer.

As part of the Gateway agreement, both posts are multi-tasked as to cover all partnerships' needs, giving consistency to the customer for whoever serves them. Both officers still retain any specialist skills they have i.e. Highways information.

It is considered that there is scope to integrate the visitor information service, by utilising the same model used now for GBC, KCC and partner services. In addition, If the meet and greet option was pursued this would not have an impact on current agreements held between GBC and KCC.

Finance

The financial provision for the Tourism function is set out in Table 1 below (based on those costs charged to cost centre G033 – TownCentric).

Table 1: Tourism financial position 2015/16 and 2016/17 budget

Description	2015/16 Original Budget (£)	2015/16 Final Outturn (£)	2015/16 Year-end Variation (£)	2016/17 Original Budget (£)
Employee Expenses	125,670	109,430	(16,240)	132,430
Premises Related Expenses	49,870	30,480	(19,390)	51,870
Transport Related Expenses	600	100	(500)	600
Supplies & Services	70,750	55,100	(15,650)	87,630
Support Services Expenditure	89,150	89,150	0	90,260
Capital Charges	6,300	5,230	(1,070)	6,300
Fees, Charges & Other Income	(77,900)	(50,390)	27,510	(77,900)
Total	264,440	239,100	(25,340)	291,190
Controllable	168,990	144,720	(24,270)	194,630
Non-controllable	95,450	94,380	(1,070)	96,560
Total	264,440	239,100	(25,340)	291,190

Based on 2015-16 outturns, the costs of the tourism function (largely comprising those activities provided by TownCentric) is £239,100 per annum. Of this figure, £89,150 is made up of recharges from central support departments (such as Finance, Legal and HR). The direct net cost of tourism and the TownCentric Tourist Information Centre is therefore approximately £150,000 per annum.

NOTE:

- Associated costs: There would be one-off property costs associated with moving TownCentric for which a budget of £50,000 should be allowed for at this stage.
- Lease: The property is leased from Queenridge Properties Ltd and although the lease expired in September 2011, the council is 'holding over' on this arrangement on a year-by-year basis. In terms of contractual obligations, the lease can be terminated on three months' notice.

Overview Scrutiny Committee - Recommendation

Recommendation

In consideration of the facilities available to the Customer Services/Gateway area of the Civic Centre, it is recommended that the council changes the way in which it delivers its tourism function and related services (as detailed in the report).

Specifically this would see the closure of the existing TownCentric facility and that the council's Customer Service Welcome Desk be extended to accommodate a new tourism function, accompanied by a review of the various related tourism services in regards to their on-going financial sustainability.