

Chepstow Chamber of Commerce & Tourism
Special Consultation Meeting with MCC re The Future of Tourist Information Centres
3rd February 2011
6.00pm at The Beaufort Hotel, Chepstow

Attending the meeting were more than 110 people, consisting of residents, community group representatives and businesses that might be potentially affected by any changes to the tourism services.

The President explained that the Chamber had received a copy of the discussion paper along with a consultation letter and a survey to be completed. Before any response was made to the Council by the Chamber, she had invited Council Officers Kellie Beirne, Farooq Dastgir and Cabinet Member Cllr Bob Greenland to present details of the review to the meeting and to answer any queries that might arise and to listen to the views of the meeting.

Cllr Greenland opened the discussion by explaining Monmouthshire County Council were looking at how they delivered the service and to see how the budget might be better used for promoting tourism. Ms Beirne and Mr Dastgir gave a power point presentation outlining the proposals, issues and opportunities presented in the discussion document. The Council propose to reorganise their Tourism Budget to enable them to spend more money on technology. Their proposal includes promoting "Monmouthshire" as a brand, providing a new high tech website, phone 'apps', interactive booths and touch screen information points. Ms Beirne made it clear that they were undergoing a Consultation Process, and that no decision had yet been made to close Tourist Information Centres

After the presentation those present were given the opportunity to raise their concerns and views.

- The Staff at the TIC had not yet been consulted for options for increasing income to offset costs. For several years Chepstow TIC had developed a business plan with ways of increasing revenue at the centre, but these had not been considered. It was requested that their business plan be now considered as a way of increasing revenue to the TIC. There was a limited budget for the purchase of stock in the TICs and reinvestment of stock during the year was needed. At present if a product sold out staff were not permitted to buy in more. Perhaps local produce could be sold on a sale or return commission basis. This would reduce any advance expenditure. There was an opportunity to increase income in Chepstow TIC by providing a coffee shop area within the centre. It was accepted that more accommodation bookings are done on line prior to visiting the town; however, there is still a place for TICs when visitors actually arrive in the town.
- Since the opening of the Second Severn crossing less people are passing through Chepstow and it was agreed that spending money in an effective way was important to encourage people to visit. Increased signage on the motorways (M4) before the Almondsbury interchange and at the New Severn Crossing would help by directing visitors back into Monmouthshire. MCC need to work out how to attract more visitors in to the towns in the winter months and to attract more visitors from the UK rather than abroad. It was difficult to encourage people arriving by coach to explore the town and without the TIC staff informing them of the interesting points of the town, less visitors would walk up to the top of the town.
- It was felt that although the use of digital technology was important, no mention had been made of technologies such as Facebook and Twitter that were already easily

accessible and at no extra cost. These needed to be used as tools and should be worked on as a way of complimenting TICs with daily posts by staff informing people of the latest events/activities for the day, etc. The TIC's fulfilled vital role giving current local information that web based content could not provide. The staff at the TIC are constantly updating, on an hourly basis, information gained from their contacts and local knowledge. Web based information is only good as the person inputting the data, and they are unlikely to have the local knowledge of the TIC staff.

- Tourism is important to the economic development of Monmouthshire towns. In the current digital marketing climate the council needed to produce a Marketing plan before proceeding and profile search terms need to be investigated. The www.wyevalley.com site has just been completely reworked by MCC Tourism section. MCC own the domain www.visitmonmouthshire.com, which has web forwarding to www.visitwyevalley.com. However they do not own www.visitmonmouthshire.co.uk. The last site has recently been set up by a private individual and its content could be seen to be as competition with the MCC websites. After talking to a number of website and SEO people, the general consensus is that when fully optimised www.visitmonmouthshire.co.uk will feature higher on a Google search than the MCC sites. This casts doubt on the logic of trying to maximise on the Monmouthshire brand when MCC do not own the correct domain. MCC if intent on producing new web based applications and sites, should put work out to tender, in order to get the best possible products at a competitive price rather than use their own in house developers. Members were also concerned about the effect of rebranding Monmouthshire. The Wye Valley is known all over the UK and beyond, and perhaps we should rebrand as "Monmouthshire and the Wye Valley" to be more inclusive.
- Queries were raised on what analysis had been made to arrive at the figures presented in the document. The document stated that footfall in TICs had fallen; however the footfall in Chepstow had increased by 2%. Over 49000 visited TIC in Chepstow last year those visitors had the opportunity to use the internet beforehand but still visited the TIC on arrival. It is impossible to calculate the benefit to the local economy these visitors make. The accuracy of the figures presented by MCC were queried, one visitor on receiving kindly and expert advice on walks in the area by Chepstow TIC staff had later in the year brought 60 people on a walking holiday spending an estimated £12,000 in the area. None of these 60 people had visited the TIC but without the initial visit by one person none would have visited Chepstow. Measuring the actual footfall only measures part of the benefits TICs give to the town.
- Enquiries had been made with Brighton, a town quoted as an example of having an extensive collection of free podcasts; The Destinations Manager in Brighton had reported that these high tech facilities had been added as complimentary to Brighton's TIC's not as a replacement. He considered Brighton's TICs were an essential component of the tourism industry in the town. The TIC provides a vital human contact for visitors IT is a wonderful tool to assist in human contact but should not replace it. TIC staff are the welcoming face of Monmouthshire.

Ms Beirne thanked Chamber for giving her the opportunity to present MCC's Future of the Tourist Information Centres. She pointed out that there was a fixed budget for tourism and in order to move forward with technology, money which currently keeps our TIC'S open would need to be freed up in some way and looked forward to hearing any suggestions that businesses and organisations put forward in response to this document.

The president of the Chamber thanked all those who had attended the meeting to express their opinions and assured them that these would be taken in to consideration in the Chamber's response to the discussion paper.