ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
27 MARCH 2019

VISIT NEWARK & SHERWOOD PRESENCE ONLINE

1.0   Purpose of Report

1.1   To provide the Economic Development Committee with proposals relating to the significant development of the District's tourism presence online.

2.0   Background Information

2.1   According to external market research, presented to the Committee at its last meeting, the main reasons cited by people for not visiting Newark & Sherwood are:

- 'Not sure what's there'; and
- 'Not sure there's enough to do'

Once people do visit, however, they rate their experiences highly. This indicates that the main barrier to increased visitor footfall is a lack of profile and awareness of the destination and its attractions. In comparison to other destinations, Newark & Sherwood does not resonate strongly as a destination 'brand'. It is recommended that this needs to be addressed with a sustained and targeted tourism marketing plan focussing on three distinct but complementary destination brands – Newark, Southwell and Sherwood Forest.

2.2   The market research confirmed that the source most used by visitors to find out about Newark & Sherwood prior to their visit is the internet and that 69% of first time overnight visitors to Newark & Sherwood found out about the accommodation they stayed in through the internet/associated accommodation apps. 71% of regional respondents said they used websites and 58% specifically said they used Google to access information about places to visit. The online presence of Newark & Sherwood's visitor offer therefore plays a crucial role and increasingly important going forward in promoting the destinations and their visitor attractions.

2.3   Newark & Sherwood District Council's website for information about attractions, events and facilities for visitors is currently https://www.visitnewarkandsherwood.info/ which was launched in April 2017. The site currently gets approximately 4,000 unique visitors per month. Its average position in Google organic search rankings is 12th and in Google Mobile it is 24th. This is mainly for three reasons:

i)   The platform is not technically flexible enough to support engaging content that is recognised by search engines

ii)   The site is not fully responsive for mobile devices which means it is not favoured by Google

iii)   Depending on the search terms used by visitors, search engines return numerous results for other sites with related content including:

- https://www.newark-sherwooddc.gov.uk/tourism/
- http://www.visit-newark.co.uk/
- http://www.nationalcivilwarcentre.com

- https://www.palacenewarktickets.com/
- http://www.newarktownhallmuseum.co.uk/
- http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/culture-leisure/country-parks/sherwood-forest
- http://www.visitsherwood.co.uk/
- http://www.southwellcouncil.com/

2.4   The online experience for prospective visitors is therefore confusing and potentially frustrating with different websites providing overlapping information and competing for search engine rankings. There is not a clear primary website providing comprehensive and engaging content about the District's attractions, events and facilities for visitors in one easily accessible and recognisable place. This does not provide a positive start to the visitor's experience or their perception of the destination 'brand' and it is a major tourism marketing weakness.

2.5   It also means that different parties are having to maintain these different websites and commit various resources for hosting, content production and, where appropriate, search engine optimisation (SEO) and pay per click (PPC). The published Destination Management Plans for Newark, Southwell and Sherwood Forest affirm that effective partnership working is critical in delivering the best possible environment to develop the tourism product offer and promote it to our key target audiences.

3.0   Proposals

3.1   It is proposed that a project commences immediately to create a new tourism online presence for the District's attractions and facilities. The project will be informed by the following strategic principles:

- Three distinct but complementary destination brands – VisitNewark; VisitSouthwell; VisitSherwoodForest
- Cross-promotion of destinations
- Customer orientation
- Working in partnership
- Efficiencies

3.2   A '3-in-1' website solution is proposed with some shared content (e.g. maps, events calendar) across three related microsites for the destination brands, on the same platform and with the same technical infrastructure. This will provide a more coherent and user-friendly online experience for visitors and better encourage them to find out more about the destinations:

- VisitNewark.co.uk
- VisitSouthwell.co.uk
- VisitSherwoodForest.co.uk

We already own these .co.uk domain names.

3.3   The new '3-in-1' site will be supported by Newark & Sherwood District Council in terms of content management, SEO and PPC as well as hosting and technical support. A full-time Tourism Digital Marketing Officer (to be recruited) will source, write, edit and manage content including regular liaison with contacts at the District's multiple visitor attractions

and businesses to ensure it is highly relevant and up to date. This will ensure the site is more engaging, user-friendly and SEO-friendly, resulting in higher organic and paid search rankings. This will demonstrate valuable support to the District's tourism sector and negate the need for the commitment of resources to maintain other sites.

3.4   The Tourism Digital Marketing Officer will also source and create engaging written and visual content for new social media channels for the three destination brands and deliver integrated digital marketing campaigns. These will increase traffic and online goal conversions.

3.5   Stakeholders responsible for some of the other related websites (2.3 above) have been engaged and have provided positive feedback on the proposed approach with a shared belief that the new website will have potential to attract and engage a greater volume of visitors and potential visitors online to the benefit of all involved.

3.6   We will consider costed options for the website redesign and invite proposals from at least three different external website development agencies with experience of comparable projects.

3.7   It is envisaged that procuring, designing, building and launching the website will take approximately 12 weeks, meaning that it will be live in time for the Summer holidays. It is proposed that the commissioned designers will host the website for a six month period, before ICT colleagues permanently take on this responsibility.

4.0   Equalities Implications

4.1   The new website requirements specification will include the criteria to be accessible and compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) at level AA. It will streamline the exitsing online service for visitors.

5.0   Financial Implications (FIN18-19/7055)

5.1   The estimated cost of the website redesign is likely to be accommodated through underspend within Promotion of Tourism Budget for 2018/19, which has been approved to carry forward to 2019/20. ICT have advised that, subject to a six month hosting period referred to in paragraph 3.7, they will be able to absorb any costs associated with hosting the new website in-house.

5.2   The new Tourism Digital Marketing Officer post has been graded NS8 by a job evaluation panel. The annual cost will be £29,420 (includes on-costs), required from 2019/20 onwards. These additional costs will be covered by a £15,000 increase in budget from 2019/20 onwards that was previously agreed at the meeting of Economic Development on 16 January 2019, plus savings of approximately £15,000 (based on external spend of £15,500 in 2018/19 and £23,500 in 2017/18) on current digital media external agency costs that would no longer be required.

6.0   Comments of Director

6.1   I fully endorse the recommendations to create and host the '3 in 1' website, which will perform important functions linked to promoting the tourim 'brands' on offer for the District and growing the visitor economy. It will ensure a single platform for those searching for Newark & Sherwood attractions, reducing any delay and frustration in accessing information. A single platform will also ensure the 'brands' appear higher in any Google search rankings, being towards the top of any related search.

7.0   RECOMMENDATION

That the Buisness Manager - Tourism be given delegated authority, in consultation with the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, and Opposition spokesman to procure, design and implement a new '3 in 1' tourism website solution.

Reason for Recommendation

The current online presence is fragmented and confusing for visitors and prospective visitors, representing one of the greatest marketing weakness. There is a need to provide visitors with a much more engaging and user-friendly online experience by increasing the profile, awareness and reputation of the District's online tourism offer. This, in turn, will increase visits, dwell time, and expenditure within and beyond the District.

Background Papers

Nil

For further information, please contact Richard Huthwaite, Business Manager - Tourism on Ext 5951.

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