



VisitEngland 

**Case studies:  
Alternative Information  
delivery models**



## 1. Introduction

This report was commissioned by VisitEngland (VE) and North West Development Agency (NWDA) with the aim of understanding and illustrating the growing number of new visitor information (VI) delivery models in England.

In broad terms, visitor information delivery models can be categorised under 3 main headings, which reflect a hierarchy of cost:

- Face to face (F2F) services (most expensive)
- Contact centre services – phone and email communication (less expensive)
- Internet services and self-service provision (least expensive)

TICs, the traditional model for face-to-face provision, are intrinsically high cost. So the focus in recent years has been on exploring alternative forms of provision and business improvement – reducing costs, improving income and maximising value for money.

F2F services may be delivered in-house or contracted out. In-house service models are managed directly by the funder, usually public sector. The variety of new business models reflects a drive for greater cost-effectiveness:

- Relocation (to new standalone premises)
- Co-location (joint occupation in “honeypot” locations with highfootfall, e.g. attractions, transport hubs, key retail developments)

- Shared council service (also co-location, but this time the premises are shared with another Council service, usually a library/one-stop shop etc)
- Sub-letting (to commercial tenants to offset premises costs)
- Mobile and outreach (services which may or may not operate from a building)

Contracted out service models involve the funder inviting delivery by another body through a SLA or less formal partnership agreement. Examples include:

- Outsourcing (TIC management is delivered by a contractor)
- “Franchising” (Third parties, often private, are granted permission to use the information brand)
- Council partnership (most often, the devolution of TIC management to local – i.e. town/parish – council management)

In the case of contact centre services delivery may again be either in-house (within a Council tourism department or contact centre) or contracted out (to a DMO, private provider or joint venture company). Internet and self service provision involves the same mix of private/public partners. It is a very broad church covering:

- Websites with dedicated “travel planner” pages

- E-newsletters
- Bed booking partnerships with online consolidators (e.g. Late Rooms)
- I-network initiatives and white label distribution
- Social media and peer to peer services
- Kiosks and automated information displays
- Leaflet distribution and display
- Apps (smart phone applications)
- SatNav partnerships
- Ambassador schemes (training business partners to deliver visitor information)

The sheer range and complexity of delivery models can be confusing. In this report we have sought to demystify and categorise the main forms of provision by drawing on a range of relevant case studies. We are much indebted to all the organisations that have given their support to enabling this desk research.

The case studies provide a snapshot of the way the VI supply side is changing. For the purposes of this report we have divided them into 3 main sections:

- In-house face to face services
- Contracted out face to face services
- Other forms of customer contact services: phone/email/web/ICT

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**In-house face to  
face services**

## 2. In-house face to face services

The Tourist Information Centre (TIC) is the traditional form of in-house F2F service model. Various referred to as the “visitor information centre”, “tourist office” or “tourism centre”, it involves a staffed office-based service usually located in a prime central location which enjoys high footfall and visibility.

As this business model is intrinsically high cost the focus in recent years has been on business improvement – reducing costs, improving income and maximising value for money. VE’s research into TIC income generation best practice in 2009 revealed that much can be achieved by staying at the same premises and proactively seeking out new opportunities to improve business performance. However, there are at least 5 alternative approaches to improving in-house service effectiveness and efficiency, viz:

- Relocation
- Co-location
- Sub-letting
- Mobile and outreach
- What follows is a short illustration of each of these different models.

### 2.1 Relocation model

In the context of this report, we have defined relocation as transferring the TIC business to alternative, local, self-contained premises. The rationale for relocation is driven by local opportunities which vary according to each destination’s circumstances: shifting urban geography, proximity to major new attractions, cost reduction etc.

Two high profile relocations in 2010 concerned the TICs in York and Bristol.

#### Case study: York

Visit York’s information centre transferred from the De Grey rooms to a prominent new site at 1 Museum Street, within sight of the Minster, in May 2010. A £1 million capital project, the regional development agency and City Council were among the key funders. The weaknesses of the former VIC – no disabled access, away from peak visitor flows, and restricted space for merchandise in a facility having just one entrance – were key factors in moving the centre.

The main aims of the investment were identified as:

- Promoting York and the region in a modern, contemporary way making extensive use of new technology

- A regional gateway and showcase for the whole of the Yorkshire region
- A one-stop shop for visitors, residents, shoppers and businesses
- Combining the VIC operation with Visit York’s HQ and business engagement team
- Contributing to the target annual growth of 5% in the region’s tourism earnings

The relocation offered Visit York the opportunity to extend core services (information, accommodation, tickets, events, merchandise etc) with online and interactive facilities. It also brought under one roof the call centre and HQ teams.



## What are the greatest benefits? Visit York cited the following benefits:

- Since opening the centre has more than doubled its target 40% increase in footfall, achieving nearly 162,000 visitors in the June – September peak period
- Merchandise sales rose from £19,348 in summer 09 to £36,907 in summer 2010
- Improved accessibility for all and extended evening opening hours Wider product and service range and better presentation
- Flexible merchandising and exhibition space (changing with the season)
- Improved resident and VFR information
- Dedicated service areas (e.g. for accommodation, event promotion/booking and travel planning) as opposed to a single counter
- Extensive use of new technology AV screen advertising has proved very popular with tourism businesses

## The biggest challenge?

Planning and listed building consents in an historic building.

### Further information:

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## Case study: Bristol

Bristol's new TIC, run by Destination Bristol, opened on 16th January 2010 at E-Shed on Bristol's historic harbourside. We spoke to John Hallett, Managing Director for Destination Bristol, in September 2010 to understand the background to the move.

The destination partnership has a long track record of adopting a commercial approach to visitor services and pioneering new visitor information business models. These have included developing information points in shopping centres, attractions and the railway station. Until January 2010 Destination Bristol ran an information desk at Bristol Science Centre.

John summed up the advantages of co-location with others succinctly: footfall and sharing costs being the two prime benefits. So what were the benefits of moving out of the Science Centre and setting up a new, standalone service in the city?

- Control of service quality and presentation. The TIC has a very visible role in sending out the right messages to stakeholders about who you are and what you do. If service quality is compromised, so is the image of the organisation
- Better control of income: the advantage of cost-sharing is inevitably lessened if the landlord wants to make money too – you end up without much net gain
- Exploiting new promotional and cultural partnerships with the University of the West of England and Watershed Media Centre.

The new location offers a gallery exhibition space to showcase the arts and promote business partners.

- Improved footfall. Visitor numbers have more than doubled in 2010 to over 118,000.

## 2.2 Co-location mode

Co-location can be a cost-effective delivery option in locations with high footfall and adequate space to permit joint occupation. Information services have gravitated towards “honeypot” attractions, transport hubs and key retail developments.

### Case study: Coventry

Coventry’s visitor information centre is managed by CV One, the destination management partnership. Originally, the TIC operated from standalone premises adjacent to the Cathedral but was re-sited within the tower of St Michael’s Cathedral ruins a few years ago. The co-location enables the TIC to reach more visitors at their point of arrival and reduce costs (it operates rent-free) whilst opening up 7 days a week access to the tower and improved ticket sales revenues. Hitherto, the attraction had restricted access and was staffed by volunteers. However, co-location also brings a down side – there is restricted space for merchandise sales.

In recent years, CV One has explored a number of short-term opportunities to extend the visitor information service at main gateways and attractions. These have included a service at the Ricoh Arena (a multi-purpose events, conference and football venue) and the city’s Transport Museum.

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### Case study: Birmingham Airport TIC

The project was proposed in 2009 after a series of mystery shopping surveys revealed a lack of satisfactory service and visitor welcome at the existing airport information desk. At the time, the airport was seeking to reduce staffing and re-site its information service. A new unit, which will be opposite all arrivals when refurbishment is completed in spring 2011, was proposed.

Half the space was offered at zero rent, rate and maintenance cost to Marketing Birmingham. The unit, shared with a complimentary meeting point service, is open 7 days a week, 365 days a year, from 7am to 8pm. Currently, three members of staff are employed to work at the centre.

The unit is surrounded by key retail outlets including Simply Foods, Costa Coffee and WH Smith. Services provided from the centre mirror that of MB’s other visitor centres, including event and attraction ticket sales, transport tickets, souvenir merchandise sales, visitor information, and also a 24hour touchscreen information point outside the centre. The centre was partially supported by a £30k grant for two years from the regional development agency (ending March 2011) but is mainly funded by Marketing Birmingham, with some additional new funding from Centro, a transport partner. The rationale was to provide a high quality hub information service to business and leisure visitors on arrival at Birmingham Airport, encouraging visitors to explore the city and region more widely.

### What are the greatest benefits?

Being in a key location with high footfall opposite the main arrivals gateway provides an excellent opportunity to target services at the right people.



“The airport is a flexible and mutually beneficial partner. The opening of this centre is aligned to our future aim to relocate from our Rotunda city centre position to the new New Street train station in 2014. We are in a key location to promote Birmingham and the region effectively and increase visitor spend, stay and their perception of the area at a low overhead cost”. Jennifer Young, Head of Visitor Experience, Marketing Birmingham

**What are the downsides?** Income levels are currently low so staffing is minimal. However, this may change in January 2011 when the arrivals area refurbishment is complete.

**Further information:** Jenny Young, Head of Visitor Experience, Marketing Birmingham. Tel: 01212025032. Email: Jennifer.Young@marketingbirmingham.com

## 2.4 Sub-letting model

The sub-letting business model is most appropriate in popular centre-of-town locations which provide adequate space to sub-let units for office, retail or catering use.

### Case study: Canterbury Visitor Information Centre

Canterbury Visitor Information Centre (VIC) provides a good example of this approach. The accommodation above the VIC is sub-let to Ferns Cafe Restaurant which offers traditional English fare throughout the day for up to 40 covers.

Further information: Clive Richardson, Visitor Services Manager, Canterbury City Council.  
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Walled Garden at Goodnestone Park



Ferns Cafe Restaurant above Canterbury VIC

## 2.5 Outreach model

This may or may not involve operating from a building. The information service is “peripatetic” and moves to areas of high traffic according to demand. It is about taking the TIC to the visitor and is especially relevant for one-off events and festivals. “Visitor information patrols” have been particularly successful in heritage cities such as Warwick, Stratford and York where there are high concentrations of visitors moving around the historic centre. Here we have chosen an example of an outreach service in a big city: Birmingham.

### Case study: Birmingham mobile service

This may or may not involve operating from a building. The information service is “peripatetic” and moves to areas of high traffic according to demand. It is about taking the TIC to the visitor and is especially relevant for one-off events and festivals. “Visitor information patrols” have been particularly successful in heritage cities such as Warwick, Stratford and York where there are high concentrations of visitors moving around the historic centre. Here we have chosen an example of an outreach service in a big city: Birmingham.

The service in Birmingham is organised by the DMO, Marketing Birmingham (MB). It involves a team operating from mobile units equipped with welcome point, literature display rack, graphic display boards and laptop with internet connection. The units have been deployed at a variety of key events inside and outside the city. In 2010 these included the Spring Fair, Warwickshire County Cricket club matches, “Taste of Birmingham” festival and the Liberal Democrat Spring Conference.

MB targets a minimum footfall of 400 contacts per day for staffed mobiles. They are relatively inexpensive by comparison with staffed TICs. (An estimated £10K capital investment was invested in 3 mobile units, but otherwise the only ongoing costs are staff and expenses plus mobile internet connection. MB estimates that costs are approximately £100 per staffed mobile day).

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**In-house face to  
face services**

### 3. Contracted out face to face services

There are a number of different approaches to “contracting out” the service, ranging from informal “light touch” partnership arrangements, to more formal contractual arrangements documented in “Service Level Agreements”. The latter is most appropriate when allocating or transferring assets (money, staff, systems) to pay for specified services and standards.

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In this report we have researched 5 alternative approaches to contracting out face to face services. The rationale for these changes is underpinned by sustainability (at worst, if it is not done in a different way there will be no service) and seeking improvements in effectiveness and efficiency.

In this section we have explored examples of:

- Outsourcing
- Commercial partnerships and “franchising”
- Council partnerships
- Corporate models
- Social enterprise and voluntary service models

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#### 3.1 Outsourcing model

By “outsourcing” we mean transferring the service, or sub-contracting, to a third party.

In South East England the practice of outsourcing the management of TIC services is well established. Tourism South East (TSE), the regional tourist board, currently runs seven TICs on behalf of local authorities. TSE lists the main benefits as economies of scale, expertise and best practice, limited risk, and freedom from operational liability.

## Case study: Bicester Village

Bicester Village is a luxury outlet shopping village just off Junction 9 of the M40 in Oxfordshire, run by Value Retail (VR) (which owns 9 such villages across Europe). It has a strong overseas as well as domestic visitor market. Until 2008 the TIC was run by TSE on behalf of, and with core funding provided by, Cherwell District Council (CDC) and additional support from VR (prime rent-free site and marketing expertise).

In 2007, the three partners (VR, CDC and TSE) commissioned a review which resulted in the decision to transfer the management of the service to VR. The decision was made on cost-cutting grounds. CDC ceased funding TSE and invited VR to take over the running of the centre, engaging staff and delivering the service directly, operating under a SLA. VR have retained TSE in a consultative and training capacity to ensure standards comply with national norms (Official Partner status).

VR are about to invest a further £100K into upgrading the TIC with a refit and new self-service technology. At the same time, it is recognised that the amount of funding support from CDC is set to reduce annually. So why should a private operator be interested in incurring costs to run a TIC? From VR's perspective the key elements of the "value proposition" are:

- Footfall – some 15% of the village's customers use the TIC
- Professional image – retailing is VR's core business, so it has to be done well
- Control of service range and quality – VR require a voucher redemption service and welcome point for their "concierge services" (hands-free shopping and valet parking)

- Customer intelligence
- Corporate social responsibility – VR recognises the need to nurture the relationship with the local community and "give something back"
- Close linkages with local and national tourism bodies – VR has a very strong Chinese market (40% of their international business) and works closely with VisitBritain on overseas promotions. Being an "official partner" is important to ensure national recognition.

**What are the greatest benefits?** The service has been maintained in a climate of financial constraint. Nicola Riley, Arts and Visitor Services Manager for Cherwell District Council commented "the greatest benefit is that a service, albeit arms length, has been maintained and the 4.5 million plus visitors to Bicester Village still have access to local information."

**What are the downsides?** It is often a challenge to maintain the profile for smaller, local tourism products and services, when working with a partner with wider interests. The natural brands that Bicester Village associates with all lie outside the District.

**Further information:**

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Botany Bay, Kent, England

### 3.2 Franchising model

Essentially this model involves granting permission to third parties to use the information brand name in their business activities in exchange for providing defined information services. The “i” kitemark is not owned by destinations and therefore usually sits alongside the place marketing brand to convey to customers that it is the “official” source of local visitor information.

The information service franchise is rather different from normal business franchising. In business, the franchisee often has to raise an initial lump sum and pay ongoing management service fees (usually based on a percentage of turnover). The information service franchise, by contrast, tends to involve resources flowing in the opposite direction, usually in the form of destination branding and service support. However, it is comparatively low cost as the franchisee bears the staff and premises costs.

### Case study: Silverstone Visitor Centre

Silverstone Visitor Centre, which became an Official Partner TIC in 2008, provides a good example of this approach. The creation of a TIC at Silverstone is the product of local partnership and encouragement from East Midlands Tourism, South Northamptonshire District Council and the DMP, Explore Northamptonshire Limited.

The centre is fully funded by Silverstone circuit as a service to their visitors and the local community. There are no revenue costs to the public sector partners although the DMP and EMT helped with initial set-up costs including branding and display material. The official Northamptonshire tourism brand is displayed alongside the Silverstone branding. A 3-year SLA is in place between the DMP and Silverstone covering issues such as services to be provided, opening hours, staffing, training, signage and performance targets. In return, Silverstone gets publicity, kiosk and print supplies from the DMP and a positive community profile.





### Key Lessons:

Robin Tjolle, Project Manager for the DMP, cited 2 key success factors:

Shared objectives: Management “buy in” is essential to sustaining the service. It was clear there was mutual interest in the same goals. For Silverstone there were marketing and PR benefits in offering a TIC service – raising the profile of the circuit locally and nationally, and reaching new customers. Many people view Silverstone as a once a year Grand Prix venue. They wanted to up-sell their driving experiences and programme of other events throughout the year. It offered scope to generate repeat visits. The TIC also helps them achieve their corporate social responsibility objectives for the local community.

Site displays and promotions: For the DMP, it was critical to achieve a profile for the wider Northamptonshire product. They do this through external branding (the TIC carries the Explore Northamptonshire logo) and internal displays: branded leaflet rack (which is regularly serviced by the DMP), touch-screen kiosk with a web feed to their DMS and on-site promotions. The latter, “Northamptonshire Presents Britain on Show”, is a campaign and brochure featuring a festival of events with 2 for 1 offers and discount vouchers. In a site with high footfall where many visitors have already made their travel plans, it is essential to have an incentive to encourage visitors to return.

See <http://www.britainonshow.co.uk> for further details.

#### Further information:

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Oundle, Northamptonshire, England

### 3.3 Council partnership model

This model involves the transfer of the service to another council. In some parts of England, particularly where unitary councils have been created, there has been a trend to devolve management of TIC services to a more local parish or town council. We have chosen a case study from Cornwall to illustrate some of the issues involved.

#### Case study: Newquay

On 1st April 2009, Cornwall Council became the single unitary council for the county. From that date it inherited 4 TICs previously run by District Councils: Falmouth, St Ives, Penzance and Newquay. The management of TICs transferred to Cornwall.

Development Company (CDC), a local authority controlled company set up by the Council to deliver economic development services. CDC has resolved, wherever possible, to seek external partners to run TICs, with some interim grant support. Newquay is the first successful example of this approach.

Most TICs in Cornwall are run by a variety of private operators, Town Councils and Tourism Associations. CDC currently provides an annual grant to support external partners, varying from £2,500 - £15,000, as well as providing systems and management support through the newly appointed Tourism Development Executive.

By 2009, Newquay Town Council (NTC) had achieved Quality Council status and was pursuing a policy of “active partnering” with the aim that it should deliver more Cornwall Council/ CDC services locally. It had ambitions to be at the heart of tourism support for the town. The TIC was not originally on its list of priorities, but proactive discussions with senior politicians raised its profile. It also helped that the TIC had been refurbished and equipped with new ICT systems following a 6 month closure.

A transitional working group of officers was important to enable the smooth transfer of ownership to take place in 2010. Two full-time staff transferred under TUPE.

Ongoing support from CDC is seen as essential to ensure future success, but there is a recognition that direct grant aid will diminish. In 2010/11 CDC committed to funding some £26,000, some of which is a share of their annual tourism membership scheme. A Newquay trade membership scheme has been established to lever additional private sector support.

Looking ahead, NTC and Visit Cornwall (CDC’s DMO) have drafted a Visit Newquay Tourism Partnership Agreement, a public-private partnership to take forward a co-ordinated approach to marketing and visitor information services in the town. The DMO will provide a dedicated Tourism Officer to support the partnership, co-ordinate marketing and help with TIC business development. A Newquay trade membership scheme has been established to lever additional private sector support. Other income activities include website banner advertising and the launch of a new digital magazine.

**Further information:**

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### 3.4 Corporate models – trusts and companies

This model involves outsourcing the information service to a separate, independent legal entity, such as a Trust or Company limited by guarantee. Both are not-for-profit vehicles, often set up by local authorities and their partners to create more flexible business structures.



Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland, England

#### Case study: Northumberland

There are a good many examples of Councils setting up Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), not only to deliver place marketing, but also to run visitor services. The most common legal structure is the “Company limited by guarantee”.

In the North East, One North East (ONE), the regional development agency, has played a key role in working with Councils to establish Area Tourism Partnerships. Northumberland Tourism (NT) was established in 2006. Since its formation, NT has been actively reviewing roles and responsibilities for marketing, visitor information and business support. Prior to the creation of a unitary authority for Northumberland in 2009, a review of visitor services recommended the transfer of information services to NT. This was considered the best means of implementing a challenging new business model for the service, and ensuring further gains in efficiency by combining the service with destination marketing and business support expertise.

In autumn 2010, it was announced that ONE investment in tourism will almost entirely end by April 2011. Faced with significant funding reductions, it was decided to strengthen the County’s tourism partnership and extend it across Hadrian’s Wall Country. The move ensures that through NT, as the DMO, there will be one team responsible for marketing, visitor information and business engagement. The aim is to reduce duplication, achieve more for less, and cut running costs. It should also provide a more co-ordinated service for visitors and businesses. There will be a new focus on increasing the income TICs earn from visitors, directly benefitting local producers. With other regional partners, NT is contemplating a joint bid to the Regional Growth Fund (RGF).

The transfer of Council services to NT is scheduled for 1st April 2011.

**What are the greatest benefits?** If successful, it will achieve the objectives described above: operational synergy with marketing activity, and greater opportunities to offset declining funding – through a new commercial business model, strengthening business partnership, and improved capacity to source RGF and other external funding. In essence, the goal is improved sustainability.

**What are the downsides?** Not all councillors feel comfortable with outsourcing. Some have concerns about commercial activities being undertaken by a publicly-funded body. A few prefer the control and democratic accountability of in-house services. It requires sensitive, proactive communication, stressing the benefits, to reassure public stakeholders. Inevitably, as with any transfer of assets, there is potential disruption which has to be carefully managed.

**Further information:**

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## Case study: Bourton-on-the-Water

At a local level, there are a good many instances of outsourcing to independent limited companies operating a single TIC. This is common in the South West and a good example is the centre at Bourton-on-the-Water.

Bourton VIC Limited was established in 2006 and has run the information centre since June of that year. A private limited company, it has 3 directors who are equal shareholders and who take no remuneration or dividend.

The company format evolved because the local Chamber of Commerce, having negotiated a grant from Cotswold District Council, could not itself run the VIC without losing its status as a non-trading unincorporated member association. The 3 directors volunteered to take it on and run it for the benefit of the community.

The directors are responsible for the company's strategic, legal and financial affairs. 3 part-time salaried staff (with professional experience and training gained from working for Cotswold District Council) are employed to operate the centre 6 days a week throughout the year. They are supported by a team of 15 local volunteers. There is always one trained staff member on duty.

Prior to transfer, the centre was run by the District Council at an estimated cost of £80K pa. Today, it receives an annual grant of £24k, of which some £6,750 is returned to the Council in the form of rent. In 2009-10, a further £26,000 was raised from local donations, trading and fund-raising. The service has seen an increase in footfall, reaching a 12 year high of 82,831 in 2010.

“We see ourselves as involved in much more than the distribution of tourist information. We aim to turn visitors in to customers, thereby supporting local businesses who are a major local employer. Many local residents also use our services.”

**Further information:** Norman Jones, Bourton VIC Ltd.  
Tel: 01451 820211. Email: [bourtonvic@btconnect.com](mailto:bourtonvic@btconnect.com)



### 3.5 Voluntary service models

This is probably worth particular attention now in the context of the Big Society.

The “Big Society” was launched on July 19th 2010 by David Cameron. It is essentially a drive to empower communities, giving them a greater say in running and shaping their own services such as libraries, post offices, transport schemes and housing projects. Sometimes described as “people power”, it is likely to give local people more power over council spending and encourage service delivery by charities, voluntary groups and social enterprises. Critics say it is about “saving money”.

There are 4 areas that have been chosen to pilot the “Big Society” initiative. They are:

- Eden Valley in Cumbria
- Liverpool
- Windsor & Maidenhead
- London Borough of Sutton

It is too early to judge the full implications for tourism. In rural areas, such as Eden, there are proactive campaigns to keep community services open. This directly touches on the issue of vulnerable TIC services and the need to explore new models of delivery. We can expect to see the Third Sector (voluntary/ community sector as distinct from the public and private sectors) emerge as an important potential option for future service delivery.

### Social enterprises

This is a relatively new business model. Social enterprises compete in the market like any other business. They pursue and make a profit, but their motivations are driven by social or environmental purposes, rather than personal gain, or serving the interests of external stakeholders. Profits are reinvested in the business or directly into the community. For example, their purpose might be to save the local village post office or shop. Some are created by outsourcing local authority services, others emerge from the voluntary sector. Some are limited companies. A relatively new and increasingly popular development is the Community Interest Company (CIC), a legal model specifically developed for social enterprises. For example, Arun District Council is currently contracting out its TIC services in Bognor Regis and Arundel. One option under consideration is the establishment of a new CIC to run the service in Arundel.

**Further information:**

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Tower Bridge, London, England

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## Case study: Broadway

Broadway is a very attractive village located on the edge of the Cotswolds in Worcester-shire. The provision of a TIC service there predates the active involvement of the local authority (Wychavon District Council). It has always been run by volunteers, originally as part of the Broadway Traders Association. It is a good example of a Council working in partnership to deliver a service cost-effectively.

The new TIC was opened in April 2007 following the redevelopment of the former Gordon Russell furniture factory. One of the original buildings was preserved through the planning process to develop a museum and to create a new space for the TIC. The development comprises a supermarket, parish council offices, local charity 'signpost', and social housing. It has won awards for sensitive regeneration in a conservation area.

The Council was successful in securing a grant from Advantage West Midlands to equip the new TIC, in recognition of its strategic importance as a visitor gateway to the midlands. It is estimated that some 750,000 visitors use the centre annually.

The current operation remains a volunteer-run organisation. Tasks such as managing rotas, ordering stationery, managing finances etc, are divided between the volunteers. Chris Brooks, the Council's Regeneration Manager "remains in the background to provide support where possible" for two reasons. Firstly tourism remains hugely important to the District, and secondly as the landlord of the building. Currently, the Council pays the business rates, but otherwise there is no dedicated support budget.

**What are the greatest benefits?** "Commitment, flexibility, local knowledge, experience of the local area, life experience, and understanding of the local tourism attractions and places to stay".

**What are the downsides?** The biggest challenge is managing consistent quality. It is difficult to be hard on people who are volunteers and not all may have the requisite people skills. So service quality can be variable from day to day, depending on who is on the rota. It is also a challenge to get cover at short notice during absence or sickness.... and of course volunteers may leave at any time.

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## **4. Other customer contact services**

## 4. Other customer contact services

Here we consider developments in other forms of customer contact.

- Contact centre services (phone and email communication)
- Internet services
- Self-service technology

The emphasis is on seeking value for money and improving service effectiveness and efficiency.

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### 4.1 Contact centre services

Unlike TICs, contact centre services can be delivered from lower-cost premises remote from the busy High Street. There are two main models:

- In-house service – within a Council tourism department or DMO
- Out of house service – delivered as part of a Council call centre or contracted out to a private provider

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#### Case study: In-house service model – Brighton

The service is provided by VisitBrighton, the Council's integrated tourism service which includes all destination marketing and sales functions.

This is a separate contact centre away from the frontline counter. It is staffed by the same team that works on the counter, so the skills, knowledge and experience are available front and back of house. It is staffed by 1-4 people, depending on the time of year. There are two dedicated desks each with a phone and a PC, plus a shared reference kit.

Earlier this year the contact centre moved from Brighton Town Hall. It now sits in the same room as the Royal Pavilion's contact centre – which gives a busy, “buzzy” and supportive atmosphere, as everyone is doing a similar job. The phone system is accessible from two phones in the Town Hall's admin office and also from the counter, allowing additional staff to log in and out as required. This is handy in managing lunch cover as staff do not need to move offices.

The Visitor Services Manager can monitor how busy the phones are from software on her PC.

The team handles all phone and email enquiries and is encouraged to make bookings, usually emailing confirmation while the customer is still on the phone.

The service was originally launched when Brighton introduced a premium rate line – which required a consistent high quality service. In April this year the service reverted to a “normal” number – mainly to free staff up to make more bookings (which has worked to an extent) – also because the income from the premium rate line was falling significantly year on year and was not sustainable.



**What are the benefits?** Suzanne feels the main benefit is improved customer service. Staff are less stressed and can give 100% of their attention to the customer on the phone. More people can access the service so complaints are fewer and bookings have increased without premium rate phone “pressure”. Staff have more time to give customers all the information they need by phone and email.

**What are the downsides?** The only downsides are that it means extra staffing (there always needs to be at least one person in addition to the counter staff) and obviously you need the space to site the service somewhere away from the counter.



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## Case study: Out of house service model – Liverpool

The contact centre service for Liverpool is provided by Liverpool Direct Limited, a joint venture company set up in 2001 by the City Council and BT. Operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week all year round, it provides access by telephone, email and SMS to a diverse range of services for Liverpool residents, businesses and visitors. (The Liverpool contract runs until 2017, but LDL also delivers services to other organisations in the private and public sectors).

Liverpool Tourism outsourced tourism enquiry handling to LDL in 2006. It costs the equivalent of 2 FT staff within a dedicated tourism team of 4. They are trained on tourism and regularly updated on events by the TIC staff via a designated email address. Contact centre staff also have access to the internet and to the DMS system. All contact centre staff have a basic knowledge of attractions and events so that enquiries can still be answered when the designated tourism team are unavailable.

The reason for outsourcing to LDL was to reduce the pressure of phones ringing on the shop floor within the TICs and to centralise enquiries with a single number (as opposed to separate numbers for each TIC). In view of increasing demand for information leading up to, and during, Capital of Culture year, it was felt that the contact centre would be the best place to handle the large volume of calls.

**What are the greatest benefits?** Providing a 24/7 service. Transferring the calls away from the counter means staff can deal with visitors face to face without phones ringing, being tied down to long enquiries, and keeping other visitors waiting. It is also simpler for the customer to have one phone number for all outlets, rather than trying to find individual numbers.

**What are the downsides?** The downside can be not being on site with the advisers and therefore being less aware of the type of calls received and how they are responded to (unless spot check calls are made). It is more difficult to get the contact centre team trained up to the same standards as counter staff as their shift patterns are different. Occasionally, it can be confusing for customers who think they have got through to the shop and start asking about merchandise.



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## 4.2 Internet services

The relatively low-cost of providing an internet-based information service has meant this has become an increasingly attractive option. It is a very broad church, ranging from destination websites (some of which tend to focus on place marketing. The best incorporate a “travel planner”, rich in information content) and e-newsletters, collaborations with information intermediaries (like TripAdvisor and Google), third party white label distribution agreements, mobile web and SatNav partnerships, to commercial partnerships which seek to transact sales.

Many of these involve partnerships which are best brokered at a national level. We have chosen 4 examples which are appropriate to local and sub-regional partners. They help to illustrate the range of activity.

- Bed booking partnerships: Marketing Birmingham, Hadrian’s Wall Country
- I-network initiatives: Cheshire
- Peer to peer services: Tripbod
- Social media and social networking: Visitor Review

## Bed booking partnerships

The challenge for DMOs is to persuade local accommodation providers to allocate adequate bed stock to their DMS inventory and to make it bookable online. In the last few years many large destinations have sought partnerships with commercial bed consolidators. For example, Visit London outsource their bed booking to Superbreak.

## Case study: Birmingham’s partnership with Late Rooms

Marketing Birmingham have an agreement with Late Rooms to deliver a real time bed booking service which is available to phone and walk-in customers at their visitor centres. The destination website, [www.visitbirmingham.com](http://www.visitbirmingham.com) also provides a directory listing linking to individual accommodation sites for online bookings. The DMO receives a commission of 5% on all phone and walk-in bookings and lists a number of benefits:

- LateRooms.com has a wide range of accommodation from small B&Bs to serviced apartments to 5 star hotels in Birmingham and the region
- Customers can save up to 70% off normal rates and have access to a better choice of last-minute availability, although not all stock is NQAS assessed
- Customers can book right up to the minute of arrival. Most visitors to the TIC need to book there and then for that day/night
- Customers pay the hotel on arrival and a card guarantee is all that is needed to book
- Bookings can be instantly printed, messaged to mobile phones or emailed to the customer in English, French, Spanish, Italian and German
- It is an instant real time price and availability comparison site with full descriptions/images, AA star and customer feedback ratings integrated into maps so they can be instantly located
- MB can book out of area throughout the UK – a common request

- The booking process is quick – about 5 minutes maximum – which provides a good level of customer service over the phone and face to face
- There is a good cancellation policy – often up to the day – so that customers can view the hotel and then cancel if it is not what they require/were expecting
- It is easy to move customers to alternative accommodation for longer stays if they are not satisfied.

### Further information:

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Birmingham, West Midlands, England

## Case study: Hadrian's Wall Country (HWC)

The challenge for DMOs is to persuade local accommodation providers to allocate adequate bed stock to their DMS inventory and to make it bookable online. In the last few years many large destinations have sought partnerships with commercial bed consolidators. For example, Visit London outsource their bed booking to Superbreak.

Hadrian's Wall Heritage Ltd is a development company set up to develop the economy of the Hadrian's Wall Corridor. It is a good example of a World Heritage Site offering a wider visitor information service at the planning as well as at the visiting stage. Go to [www.hadrians-wall.org](http://www.hadrians-wall.org).

HWC uses the EnglandNet polling engine to provide product searches and bookability on its website. For other destinations taking this approach, go to [www.visitbritain.org/opportunitiesadvice/activities/onlineopps/distributionpartners.aspx](http://www.visitbritain.org/opportunitiesadvice/activities/onlineopps/distributionpartners.aspx)

The DMS offers a channel to a variety of accommodation websites offering online booking through their chosen booking partner: a "white label" approach.

The site operates rather like a destination website. It includes

- A searchable booking engine for accommodation supplied via the DMS
- Links to independent third party review sites such as Tripadvisor and social network sites like Twitter.
- Itinerary ideas: walking, cycling, themed trails including Christian heritage, "locally produced" (food, drink, crafts), nature & landscape, family fun, towns & cities
- Local tour operators, transport operators and guides
- Links to TIC pages and other sources of further information

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Hadrian's Wall in Northumbria, England

## Social media and social networking solutions

### Case study: Visitor Review

“Visitor Review” is a service provided by Digital Visitor, an online marketing company specialising in social media and social networking solutions for the tourism industry. Clients include VisitBritain, Enjoy England and Visit Blackpool.

The service provides a bespoke digital platform enabling destinations to take advantage of social media, social networking and user generated content through their own website.

Branded individually for each client, Visitor Review provides destination websites with the ability for online visitors to upload text, photos and videos, helping them to create and engage with their own online community whilst collecting valuable marketing materials.

For just over a year, VisitBritain has been using Visitor Review to drive a national social media initiative.

**Further information:** [www.digitalvisitor.co.uk](http://www.digitalvisitor.co.uk)



## 4.3 Self-service technology

Self-service visitor information systems can be:

- Static (such as touch-screen kiosks, automated information displays etc) or
- Mobile (i.e. portable information systems such as smart phones, SatNav etc)

To be effective, both rely on high quality destination data from a web feed or DMS. This business model is most relevant out of hours and in popular or remote visitor hotspots when a staffed service is not affordable. Alternatively, as at York, it is an excellent complement to a staffed service. See [http://www.visityork.org/information/visitor\\_information\\_centre/youtubenewvic.aspx](http://www.visityork.org/information/visitor_information_centre/youtubenewvic.aspx)

## Case study: Newcastle Gateshead’s app

Launched in December 2010 by Newcastle Gateshead Initiative (NGI), the local destination partnership, this is among the first UK destination I-Phone applications. It was developed as a pilot by New Mind, the supplier of the regional DMS. The app can be downloaded directly from the I-Tunes app store for £1.19.

NGI sees the app as complementary to other forms of information provision in the twin cities – TIC, pocket guide and interactive website. Content is sourced from the DMS and mirrors website information enabling searches on accommodation, eating out, what’s on, etc. The big advantage of portable GPS technology is that it puts the visitor at the centre of the experience, allowing him or her to plot where they are in relation to key facilities and to plan their itinerary on the move.

The app is promoted via posters and pocket guide at the TIC. It generates no income for NGI or the TIC as all revenue, after retail commission, goes direct to the supplier to offset development costs.

**Further information:**  
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