

Council may look at keeping former VisitScotland office open

The City of Edinburgh Council is exploring options to keep The Royal Mile's tourist information open after VisitScotland announced the closure of this and other tourism offices.

The organisation plans to shut its 25 'iCentres' across the country due to "significant" changes in the tourism landscape.

The Edinburgh branch, located at 249 High Street adjacent to the City Chambers, operates within a leased space provided by the council and shares facilities with its customer hub.

It's winding-up is part of a phased two-year closure programme and no date has been set for VisitScotland to vacate the premises.

Councillor Alys Mumford said as the capital city it was "right that we have a physical place that people can come and find information".

VisitScotland chairman Lord Thurso said the demand for iCentres had "reduced while the demand for online information and booking has continued to grow".

But Cllr Mumford said "not everyone still wants to book online," adding: "Sometimes information isn't available

online.”

Tabling a motion to explore options for ‘future use of the property as a visitor centre, including through providing a service ourselves’ – which was passed unanimously by the finance and resources committee this week – she said officials had already begun talks with VisitScotland chiefs “about what can be done with this space”.

The Green councillor added: “This is an attempt to give a mandate to that, to say this is something the council supports.

“That there might be other uses for this building still within the visitor economy that fit in well with the council’s aims.”

She said this could include a base for the city’s ‘Night Czar’ once the role is properly established, or for third sector charities and independent tour guides “who need somewhere to put bags”.

Supporting the motion at the meeting on Tuesday, Cllr Alex Staniforth said: “A visitor centre isn’t just an area where tourists go for information such as where they can get a coffee or such like.

“There’s actually a big humanitarian element to what a visitors’ centre does, because when tourists come here they come into an unfamiliar city and problems may arise.

“Our visitor centre in Edinburgh is always busy, it’s always got people inside it,

“I don’t understand the decision of VisitScotland to close it down, but I think in order to keep tourism to the city safe, to maintain a tourist sector that has an international reputation and in line with our aims to make the tourist sector greener a visitor centre is useful and we should therefore do everything we can to keep some kind of visitors

centre going in that spot.”

Announcing the iCentre closures in March, VisitScotland said there will be no compulsory redundancies as a result of the shift to a “digital first” strategy.

Lord Thurso said research showed the organisation “have a greater and more impactful role to play in providing information before visitors travel”.

He added: “Prioritising a digital first model of information provision allows us to reach potential visitors at those early planning stages when we can shape their future travel decisions.”

UK Minister for Scotland John Lamont said the move was a “blow to our towns”.

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

