

South Burnett Visitor Information Centre Network

Future of VICs Project

DISCUSSION PAPER



Discover South Burnett

www.discoversouthburnett.com.au

BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF PROJECT

In recent years the South Burnett Visitor Information Centre's (VICs) have been put under a microscope, as the tourism sector sees shifts in consumer purchase behavior, including an increased use of digital channels for searching, selecting and booking travel. Even though there is an increased role in digital channels in educating tourists about places to visit and things to do, South Burnett Visitor Information Centre's still play a crucial role in providing local information, access to market for local product and sharing local knowledge with visitors and residents.

The five (5) accredited South Burnett Visitor Information Centre's are fully funded by the South Burnett Regional Council.

As VIC's are an important contributor to tourism in the South Burnett, this discussion paper will assist with information for a number of stakeholders including the South Burnett Regional Council. This discussion paper aims to quantify the value of the VIC's and provide ideas and opportunities for continuous improvement of their offering/service delivery.

WHO

- South Burnett Visitor Information Centre Network (staff & volunteers)
- Tourism Operators
- South Burnett Regional Council

WHEN

- Feedback will be required from participants by the 31st January 2019.
- Feedback or comments can be provided in writing or email to Stacey (sperrett@southburnett.qld.gov.au) or Sarah (sschlosss@southburnett.qld.gov.au)
- The Future of the VIC's consultation and report will be compiled and completed by June 2019.

WHERE

Throughout the South Burnett

TOPICS:

1. Operations Manual
2. Volunteer Survey
3. Tourism Operator Survey
4. Review Centre's Visitor Statistics
5. Wi-Fi stats of VIC's
6. Accreditation of VIC's
7. Privatising VIC's
8. Volunteers managing VIC's (No Paid Staff)
9. Audit of VIC merchandise/stock
10. VIC's promoting South Burnett Rail Trails
11. Visitor Services

2. **VOLUNTEER SURVEY:**

Reason:

To identify training needs for the VIC Volunteers and to ascertain their likes and dislikes in their role as a Tourism Service Volunteer.

Overview:

The 2018 South Burnett Visitor Information Centre Network Volunteer survey was conducted over a four-week period during the month of June. The volunteers were asked to complete a 7 question survey either by paper form or via Survey Monkey.

There are approximately 70 volunteers across the five accredited Visitor Information Centres. A total of 45 volunteers completed the survey with most completing it using Survey Monkey. The results from the survey will help staff formulate training programs for volunteers in Council’s Visitor Information Centre’s.

Discussion Points:

- *How often should this survey be conducted?*
- *What will staff do with this information?*
- *What happens if a volunteer doesn’t want to be part of the training programs?*
- *What can be done to encourage more volunteers to complete the survey?*

Comments:

3. TOURISM OPERATOR SURVEY:

Reason:

The main objective for conducting this survey was to get a better understanding of the communications between the local tourism operators and the VIC Network. For years there have been mixed feelings from both parties about what data/information should be shared between the two. The results of the survey are hoped to help identify any gaps in communication and provide feedback on how to improve data sharing.

Overview:

The 2018 Tourism Operator Survey was conducted to find a way to improve relations between the South Burnett Visitor Information Centre Network and South Burnett Tourism Operator. The survey ran over a period of 5 weeks (late June/early July) and was sent to operators in electronic format using Survey Monkey. A total of 47 operators completed the survey. The results from this survey will help the South Burnett Visitor Information Centre Network get a better understanding of data local operators are willing to share and what they would like to receive from the Network.

Discussion Points:

- *What information does the Network actually want from Operators?*
- *How will both parties benefit from sharing information?*
- *What information from the Network would benefit Operators?*
- *What can be done to encourage more Operators to complete the survey?*

Comments:

4. REVIEW CENTRE'S VISITOR STATISTICS:

Reason:

To review visitor statistics over the last 10 years to identify; the number of visitors, where visitors are coming from and compare statistics between Visitor Information Centres.

Overview:

Going through the last 10 years' worth of visitor statistics has shown the VIC Network which years were the highest and which were the lowest. The lowest years included 2011 and 2013 when the region experienced floods in the early parts of both years. From the review the Network got an idea of where visitors are coming from and which parts of the year are the busiest.

The review showed there were some gaps in the statistics that the VIC's capture when compared to the Tourism Research Australia report on the South Burnett. These gaps helped formulate what questions were asked in the Tourism Operator Survey.

South Burnett Visitor Information Centre Statistics													
2008 to 2018													
Visitor Origin Statistics by Regional Tourism Organisation Region													
Centres included are Blackbutt, Kingaroy, Nanango, Murgon & Wondai													
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
Brisbane	15,079	16,302	14,586	13,862	13,562	11,707	11,054	10,503	11,712	12,070	7,850	138,287	22.5%
Gold Coast	2,444	2,575	1,854	1,669	1,672	1,524	1,768	1,529	1,680	1,904	1,066	19,685	3.2%
Toowoomba/Golden West	3,036	3,021	2,383	2,741	2,981	2,996	2,213	2,115	2,207	2,068	1,549	27,310	4.4%
Southern Downs	461	494	453	332	396	359	308	368	403	463	221	4,258	0.7%
Sunshine Coast	4,486	4,892	3,546	4,117	3,944	3,870	3,318	3,079	3,505	3,780	2,839	41,376	6.7%
South Burnett	16,574	17,380	22,030	17,465	17,906	17,009	15,419	13,921	13,882	12,699	8,633	172,918	28.1%
Fraser Coast	1,426	1,654	1,397	1,422	1,671	1,677	1,334	1,537	1,444	1,392	911	15,865	2.6%
Bundaberg	1,897	1,708	1,143	1,330	1,625	1,252	1,179	1,181	1,231	1,250	806	14,602	2.4%
Gladstone	357	389	438	325	274	294	236	223	326	273	199	3,334	0.5%
Capricorn	807	844	658	619	667	546	513	582	613	539	413	6,801	1.1%
Outback	280	276	217	211	228	210	160	227	200	184	215	2,408	0.4%
Mackay	439	485	541	452	410	406	413	369	442	370	291	4,618	0.8%
Whitsundays	75	73	81	64	56	88	50	76	66	62	41	732	0.1%
Townsville	453	468	338	413	363	409	369	381	477	393	270	4,334	0.7%
Tropical North Queensland	364	401	418	267	370	361	327	269	400	372	191	3,740	0.6%
New South Wales	6,001	6,500	10,873	5,118	5,625	5,540	5,684	6,266	6,544	6,400	4,336	68,887	11.2%
Victoria	3,056	3,563	3,034	2,658	2,949	3,044	2,627	3,166	3,434	3,785	2,650	33,966	5.5%
Other States	2,125	2,209	2,657	2,276	2,583	2,550	2,272	2,649	2,806	2,955	2,202	27,284	4.4%
Overseas	2,837	3,104	2,805	2,047	2,265	2,250	1,914	1,656	1,785	2,212	1,055	23,930	3.9%
Total	62,225	66,340	64,277	57,397	59,547	56,092	51,158	50,097	53,157	53,171	35,738	614,335	

***Visitor Stats are as at 2/10/2018**

Discussion Points:

- Will the results be used to improve VIC's facilities? i.e.; more budget, more improvements?
- Will this review help with marketing and promotion of the region during the busy periods?
- What data should the VIC's be capturing?
- What data is missing from the Tourism Research Australia report that VIC's or Operators can help capture?

Comments:

5. WI-FI STATS OF VIC’S:

Reason:

All South Burnett VIC’s offer free Wi-Fi. However, the way the Centre’s capture how many visitors are using it, is a bit of a hit and miss process. An audit will be conducted of what the VIC’s are currently doing to capture usage data and if there are any systems in place the VIC’s could be utilising to improve statistical reporting.

Overview:

Out of the 5 VIC’s, only 4 use the Council Wi-Fi system. Blackbutt VIC uses an external system which came about through a program by Visit Queensland, which they have been part of since 2016.

The Council system is also used by Council Libraries and Council staff. The only way VIC’s know how many visitors are using the system is by the number of vouchers that get handed out. The system is set-up where Council’s IT department sends the VIC’s a list of codes and the VIC’s then uses the codes to print out vouchers to hand out. Getting stats and data from the system is difficult due to the number of groups connected to it.

Council’s Libraries Wi-Fi process:

- A Notepad document set-up and the code is copied from a spreadsheet and then printed off like receipt and given to the customer.
- On the code spreadsheet the customer’s name is typed in.

Discussion Points:

- *Should the VIC’s have an alternative Wi-Fi supply than the Council’s system?*
- *Would the VIC’s benefit from using a system similar to that of the Libraries?*
- *Why not have all 5 VIC’s on the one Wi-Fi system?*
- *Are more visitors using Wi-Fi to plan their visits/holidays?*

Comments:

6. ACCREDITATION OF VIC'S:

Reason:

There are 5 accredited VIC's across the Network – Blackbutt, Nanango, Kingaroy, Wondai and Murgon.

Accredited VIC's play an important role in the South Burnett tourism industry by providing information to visitors, encouraging them to stay longer, experience attractions, spend more money and to revisit the region. The VIC Network relies heavily on a volunteer workforce and they operate as an important community facility.

Importance of Accreditation:

Accreditation is more than just displaying a blue, yellow and italic 'i' symbol. Accredited VIC's are part of a network, with a common goal to provide excellent customer service and standards, assist in creating memorable experiences to visitors in the region, to extend visitor stay and encourage return visits.

Overview:

When looking at the accreditation of the South Burnett VIC's a number of factors are looked at;

- VIC's that are attached to an attraction (Nanango, Wondai and Kingaroy) seem to have higher visitor traffic to those that aren't. Nanango VIC is attached to the South Burnett Energy Centre. Wondai attached to the South Burnett Timber Industry and Kingaroy has the Kingaroy Art Gallery and Kingaroy Heritage Museum on either side of it.
- Costs of accreditation each year for Council to keep all 5 accredited is \$425. (Membership \$75, annual audit \$350)
- Volunteer numbers are decreasing. Each year there seems to be a slight drop in numbers and or the hour's people are willing to volunteer.
- The VIC's have to open a minimum of 42 hours a week to stay accredited. This can be hard when a VIC doesn't have enough volunteers to help.

Accredited VIC	Non-Accredited VIC
Accredited VIC use only the yellow & blue 'i'.	Uses the blue & white symbol.
VIC must continually maintain the VIC signage policy standards to display the accredited 'i' symbol.	The blue & white symbol is not governed by a policy or guidelines.
VIC's are audited annually & receive an onsite every 2 nd year.	Non-accredited VIC's are not audited.
Accredited VIC's must be open for a minimum 42 hours every week, 7 days.	Non-accredited VIC's choose their own operating hours, there is no consistency in opening times.

Some challenges facing VIC's:

- VIC's providing paper-based information like brochures and maps and having limited opening hours have less relevance for visitors as they want high-quality information available to them 24/7.
- Increase funding pressure on return investments for local government and RTO's are challenging many VIC's to demonstrate their value.
- The notion that VIC's are a worthwhile part of the tourism distribution system is questioned by some tourism operators.
- VIC's have limited appeal for volunteers who have different expectations and requirements compared with older generation volunteers.
- VIC's struggle to maintain staff levels.
- Some VIC "owners" like local government or RTO operated have a perceived lack of value in VIC's being accredited.

ACCREDITATION OF VIC'S Cont.:

Discussion Points:

- *What is the value of having 5 accredited VIC's in the South Burnett?*
- *Where in the region should Accredited VIC's be retained?*
- *Would volunteers be more incline to volunteer in accredited or non-accredited VIC's*
- *Are there any particular accredited VIC's that could be repurposed?*

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7. PRIVATISATION OF THE VIC'S:

Reason:

Over the years there has been rumours and whispers about the privatisation of the VIC's.

Overview:

In Queensland Councils operate 49% of VIC's and 39% are operated by an RTO (Regional Tourism Operator) or an LTO (Local Tourism Operator). However, over 56% of the Qld VIC's are funded by Councils with only 19% funded by RTO's.

For years now there has been rumours and whispers of South Burnett VIC's becoming privatised so that Council could save money and staff in the management of the VIC's.



PROS	CONS
VIC's would be working more with community groups	What happens if the organisation folds/goes bust
Would be able to apply for funding	More restricted budgets or limited budgets
Less worry/costs for Council	May be a loss of staff
Still provide tourist information	
No restrictions on what to stock for merchandise.	

Discussion Points:

- *How could Privatisation of the VIC's support tourism services in the South Burnett?*
- *Is there a particular Privatisation model that would work in the South Burnett?*
- *Further Pros & Cons of Privatisation that need to be considered?*
- *What types of organisations would be interested in running/managing a VIC?*

Comments:

8. VOLUNTEERS MANAGING VIC'S (NO PAID STAFF):

Reason:

With a restructure of VIC staff it means that staff are split between VIC's, which means that volunteers have had to step up and take on more responsibilities to help with the day to day running of the VIC's.

Overview:

Since 2010, the VIC's have seen a drop in staff numbers. Back in 2010 there was a staff member at each VIC, along with weekend casual staff. Over the years with a number of restructures the staffing has declined. Through these periods volunteers have increased their responsibility and help when there hasn't been any staff present. At first the volunteers had mixed reaction to the idea of increased responsibilities.

All VIC's are managed by volunteers on weekends and through periods of staff leave. There are currently 2.6 FTE positions providing direct support to the management and operations of the VIC's.

Volunteer Numbers

YEAR	KINGAROY	NANANGO	WONDAI	BLACKBUTT	MURGON
2012	21	29	20	18	15
2013	21	27	20	18	18
2014	24	20	18	17	18
2015	23	16	18	14	20
2016	19	20	18	23	18
2017	17	18	17	23	16
2018	18	22	21	15	16

PROS	CONS
Less cost to Council as in not paying for staff wages.	Lack of volunteer numbers.
VIC staff have time to do other projects/work.	Some volunteers will sit back while others do all work.
	Stress for staff: making sure volunteers are trained, jobs to keep volunteers busy, etc.

Discussion Points:

- Which VIC's are ideal to be solely managed by volunteers?
- How many volunteers would be willing to step-up and take similar responsibilities to that of a paid staff member?
- How do VIC's retain volunteers if there is no staff in place?
- Will there be volunteers in the future to help in our VIC's?

Comments:

9. AUDIT OF VIC MERCHANDISE/STOCK:

Reason:

The main purpose of this topic is to see what percentage mark-up is used to make Recommend Retail Prices (RRP) of merchandise sold and is it consistent across all South Burnett VIC's.

Overview:

The Kingaroy VIC was the first VIC to be audited, which looked at the retail prices, cost prices, mark-up percentages and gain/loss costs to Council. The audit showed a majority of merchandise had a RRP mark-up of between 8% to 150%. There was a small amount of merchandise that's RRP was determined and set, direct from the supplier.

The Kingaroy VIC has the largest range of merchandise ranging from locally produced to the mass produced items like teaspoons, pens, postcards etc.

Back in 2012 the then Community Cultural Services department released a Services Review Action Plan 2012/2013 that referred to Points of Difference for each VIC that should reflect what merchandise each VIC sold. They were as follows:

Blackbutt: Gateway to South Burnett and Brisbane Valley Rail Trail

Nanango: Entry point to the South Burnett region through Kingaroy, Wondai and Murgon and also a focus on Energy Education.

Kingaroy: Handmade in Country, which was link to then Handmade in Country project (by Southern Qld Country Tourism)

Wondai: links to the Handmade in Country and also a timber focus

Murgon: Welcome to the South Burnett from the North and featuring indigenous art/culture

Discussion Points:

- *Should there be new points of difference for each VIC?*
- *Should there be a standard mark-up percentage across all VIC's?*
- *Which do visitor prefer to buy; locally produced or mass produced items?*
- *Should VIC's only sell should locally produce items?*
- *What is the demand for Australian Made merchandise?*

Comments:

10. VIC'S WORKING MORE WITH THE SOUTH BURNETT RAIL TRAILS:

Reason:

Around Australia there are a number of Rail Trails and there are VIC's who do exceptional promotion of the trails. Now that the South Burnett has two trails – South Burnett Rail Trail and Brisbane Valley Rail Trail, is there more that the South Burnett VIC's can do to promote them?

Overview:

The current promotion of the trails is:

- Facebook pages and Instagram pages
- Brochures
- Merchandise (hats, shirts, water bottles etc)
- Discover South Burnett website
- Staff and volunteers wear Rail Trail shirts in the VIC's and at events

VIC's and regions looked at in what they do in the promotion of their Rail Trail:	Promotional Items:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Brassall Bikeway (Ipswich) ▪ Capricorn Coast Pineapple Rail Trail (Yeppoon/Rockhampton) ▪ Fassifren Rail Trail (Scenic Rim – Boonah) ▪ Copper Coast VIC (Sth Aust) ▪ Corowa VIC (NSW) ▪ Scone VIC (NSW) ▪ Barossa Bike Hire and Cycle Tours (Sth Aust) <p>*Also in the search it was found the Barossa VIC is next door to the Barossa Cycle Hub.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - YouTube videos (professional and self-made ones) - Bike hire (including hybrid, electric, mountain and tandem bikes) - Bike tours (including guide tours) - Specialised maps on the trails - Wine and Cheese trail hampers (wine & cheese hampers with rail trail maps/guides) - Bike storage and accessories

Pros and Cons for the South Burnett VIC's if they were to offer bike hire:

Pros	Cons
Council already has ownership of 15 bikes (and accessories)	Maintenance of bikes – before and afternoon hire care.
Another revenue outlet for VIC's/Council	How to get bikes back to VIC or where hired from
Great way to promote VIC's and Rail Trails	Storage
Not a lot of VIC's in Qld offer a bike hire service for their trails so it would be good to be included in an elite group.	Training in how to use a booking/hire system
	WHS – hair nets for users under helmets, how to use a bike safely
	Costings – don't want it to be too high that it discourages visitors to use the system

*Council's NRM and Parks department has acquired 15 bikes (with helmets, baby carriers etc). It's believed NRM is looking at making the bikes available through Council's recreation facilities and VIC's.

Discussion Points:

- *Should the VIC's do bike hire for the Rail Trails?*
- *What Rail Trail merchandise sells well?*
- *What other ways can the VIC's promote the Rail Trails*

11. VISITOR SERVICES

Reason:

To improve and increase the delivery of Visitor Services by the VIC’s and volunteers.

Overview:

Currently there are a number of Visitor Services offered at the VIC’s, these include:

- Free Wi-Fi and Public Computer access
- Accommodation Availability board (Kingaroy VIC)
- Free tourist brochures/visitor guides/free South Burnett map
- Guided Town Tours
- Merchandise
- Display of South Burnett Operator videos
- Tourism Touch Screens (Murgon, Kingaroy & Nanango VIC’s)
- Bookings – volunteers/staff can make accommodation bookings for visitors

The above are great services but as the VIC’s move forward into the future it doesn’t hurt to try new services.

Here are a few examples:

1. Town Walking/Bike Tours

Visitors can book either a walking or bike town tours at the VIC. Volunteers could do the walking tours and maybe the bike as well. They would take visitors around to show points of interests, the history of the town and some of the buildings, attractions etc. This could either be a free or paid service. The tour could go for an hour. *For the bike tours the visitors would have to have their own bikes.

2. Tasting Afternoon

Local operators (1 or 2) come into the VIC’s once a month and do an hour or 1 ½ hr tasting with visitors. Visitors could book ahead (that way if there were no bookings it wouldn’t be wasting the operators time) The VIC’s would probably have to apply for some sort of food license to do this one. *Could be either a free or small fee charge.

3. Night at the Museum

Open the Museum after dark once a month to host guided tours. VIC’s could open as well to be available if visitors want to purchase souvenirs. *Could be free or a small charge.

Discussion Points:

- Are there any other suggestions of Visitor Services the VIC’s could do?
- How will new Visitor Services benefit the VIC’s?
- How can VIC’s find out what services visitors are wanting?

COMMENTS:

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