Accredited Visitor Information Centre Case Studies

Insights into their valuable contribution to tourism and communities

Gain insight into the business practices and innovative approaches adopted by a number of accredited visitor information centres (VICs). Learn how these VICs have provided measurable benefits to their region from an economic, community, digital and crisis management perspectives.

tq.com.au/vics
Introduction

Tourism Queensland is pleased to showcase the valuable role and contribution that accredited Visitor Information Centres (VICs) make to the tourism industry and regions through the provision of these 11 case studies. These profiles of VICs both in Queensland and interstate, are testament to the important and unique role that VICs have in the tourism network. The valuable and diverse range of activities that VICs undertake in delivering sustainable tourism services and memorable visitor experiences is clearly evident.

Whether it’s providing commercial booking services, creating a tourism hub, supporting events, hosting interpretive displays or supporting the latest in digital technologies, VICs are a core component of regional tourism and community activities. A theme resonating strongly is the passionate and engaging VIC staff and volunteers who are proud of their communities and the services they provide to the visitors and businesses in their region.

The case studies have been profiled with a focus on the contributions made to local and regional communities, economic benefits, crisis management and uses of digital technologies. These insightful VIC profiles will prove to be a significant resource for VIC Managers, volunteers, industry and local government partners.

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About Queensland’s Visitor Information Centre Network

The Queensland accredited visitor information centre network includes 122 centres, spread across the state from Karumba to Coolangatta.

Officially launched in Queensland on the 8th of April 2000, the italicised sign is only authorised for use by those VICs that meet the eligibility criteria and standards of the VIC Signage Policy. The policy and accreditation program are proudly administered by Tourism Queensland, with annual audits of the VICs conducted on Tourism Queensland’s behalf by Visit Queensland.

Through the audit process, VICs are encouraged to achieve, maintain, and where possible, exceed the standards of accreditation. The branding assures visitors of high quality, unbiased information and professional service from these VICs. Tourism Queensland promotes the accredited VIC network in its consumer marketing initiatives, including on its consumer site at www.queensland.com/vics.

More information on the Queensland VIC accreditation program is available at www.tq.com.au/vics
Cosmos Centre and VIC, Charleville

Charleville Cosmos Centre and Visitor Information Centre

Lessons from a rural town in how local government and the community can work together to create a commercially successful, integrated tourism product.

Charleville is fast becoming a hub for regional tourism in western and Outback Queensland, with a number of well-known regional tourist attractions in the area including the Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia Museum, the School of Distance Education, the Corones Hotel (an historical museum) and a wildlife and conservation sanctuary (including the Bilby Reserve and captive breeding program).

The Charleville VIC is run as a joint operation with the Cosmos Centre Observatory to provide a regional tourism precinct for visitors to the Charleville area. The combined centre is owned and operated by the Murweh Shire Council (Council).

The former ‘Sky Watch Observatory Centre’ was redeveloped to create the Cosmos Centre as part of the Queensland Heritage Trail Network program. With the clear outback night sky and the lack of pollution visitors enjoy a high-quality astronomy experience. On the 26th April 2003 the Cosmos Centre was opened. At this time there was a separate Visitor Information Centre (VIC) also managed by Council. In 2009 the Cosmos Centre was redeveloped to create a combined facility with the VIC (the Centre).

All stakeholders agreed that Council supporting two pieces of tourism infrastructure in the same town was not sustainable long-term. Bringing together the Cosmos Centre and the VIC enabled one set of managers and staff and a combination of volunteers to manage the visitor experience. It also provided a great promotional opportunity for the Cosmos Centre to attract visitors who were seeking tourist information but not necessarily seeking a cosmic experience.

The key target market of the Centre are travellers aged over 50 and school/educational groups.

Testimonial

"We embarked on our journey of packaging and developing guided tours to gain greater access to the travel agency network, to provide a consistent product in the low season and an opportunity for travellers to meet the locals and hear local stories. The VIC was ideally placed to deliver what the customer required. Not only have we fulfilled a need for the travellers but we have given our team another avenue to work in, which delivers a higher level of job satisfaction and income generated from the guided tours assists in reducing costs.

In this way, the VIC has become a leader in developing new product, delivering the needs of our visitors, ensuring staff have an interesting and varied workplace and above all a growth area for tourism for our Shire”

Jane Morgan
Tourism Manager – Charleville VIC
Charleville VIC’s role as a successful regional tourism precinct

Murweh Shire Council is committed to the success of the Centre as a leading regional tourist attraction and facilitator of community and economic development. Through the encouragement of the Council the Centre stands apart from many other VICs with its commercially focused approach to generating income streams.

The Centre manages a diverse range of commercial activities including day and night tours of the Observatory, a Bilby Experience Tour, guided tours of local attractions and light refreshments offered through the Cosmos Centre café. Local tourism products and merchandise are also sold through the Centre.

Always looking to innovate the Centre, in partnership with local tour operators, a new product has been developed based around the American Airforce presence in Charleville during World War II called the World War II Top Secret United States Airbase History Convoy Tour.

As a result of the commercial focus and continued development of the tourism precinct Charleville’s profile and recognition as a tourism centre has increased significantly.

The Centre’s long term goal is to become a tourism ‘hub’. A key strategy to achieve this is increasing visitation and community and regional economic benefits through the shoulder season by providing new ‘year round’ product offerings and quality tours.

Due to the success of the Centre as a joint facility Council has now stepped back from direct operational activities and steadily reduced its overall financial contributions over the last five years as alternative revenue streams continue to grow.

Performance and measures of success

The Cosmos Centre and VIC have a comprehensive joint business planning process, and produce an annual business plan as part of its funding agreement with Council.

From the business plan, annual revenue targets and visitor projections are established. The Centre also sets targets and performance indicators for partnership activities and actions they will implement over the coming year, together with their stakeholders.

Graph 1 presents total visitors through the Cosmos Centre and VIC. It shows an upward growth trend since 1999, which is consistent with continued product development and an increased commercial focus.

The Centre also tracks and reports to Council on visitor movements, ticket sales and other commercial activities and includes revenue and expenses against individual product items and guided tours.

Graph 2 provides a breakdown of income generated from the Charleville Convoy Tour and the Bilby Stars and Secrets Package Tour offered by the Cosmos Centre and VIC between July 2010 and June 2012. Over $60,000 of income was generated for the two year period as a result of these commercial products being available.

While there is a dramatic decline in business over the summer period when temperatures can be excessive in Outback Queensland, there is a general increase in income for both tours over the peak tourist seasons. The success of the Bilby Tours is promising as this unique visitor experience gains greater prominence.
Ingredients for success

Some important ingredients for VIC success include:

- Build positive working relationships with the tourism industry, civic leaders and the wider community to increase understanding of the economic and community benefits generated through investment in the Centre and other tourism products and facilities in the region.

- Develop close partnerships with the Outback Queensland Tourism Association, Tourism Queensland, Queensland Information Centre Association and the Queensland State Government’s Tourism Unit. These relationships are important to the success of the Centre, enabling it to tap into visiting journalist programs and other industry, trade and media opportunities.

- Provide staff and volunteers with the appropriate training needed to maintain a high level of customer service.

- Engage with the local community through school visits, sporting groups, education programs and attendance at local events.

- Establish a comprehensive distribution channel to market the facility. The Centre has an extensive brochure distribution database comprising both accredited and non-accredited VICs in Queensland, NSW and Victoria and intrastate and interstate attractions and accommodation facilities.

- Pursue funding opportunities through external grants. The Centre receives approximately 40 percent of its operational and development funding from external grants and programs.

- Seek to provide tourism product that is available all year as feasible for a remote location.

Testimonial

“As an accommodation provider in Charleville, any increase in visitor nights we gain is vital for the profitability of our product and for our town. Although the iconic attractions for Charleville are the Bilbies and Cosmos Centre, linking the tours on offer by developing packages and itineraries encourages travellers to stay one more night. We often hear people comment, “there is so much to do in this town, it’s refreshing to see how much the locals love their town and want to share the experiences”.

Wendy O’Hern
Owner – Bailey Bar Caravan Park & Cabins
Insight into the role of the Gladstone Visitor Information Centre in ensuring both tourism and industrial development remain a prosperous and important part of the local economy.

Well known as one of Australia’s major industrial centres, Gladstone is also the gateway to the Southern Great Barrier Reef, Capricorn Bunker group of Islands and hinterland and has fast become a popular destination for holiday makers and sea changers.

The Gladstone Visitor Information Centre (VIC) is one of four accredited VICS in the Gladstone region managed and operated by Gladstone Area Promotion Development Limited (GAPDL).

GAPDL is the region’s lead economic, tourism and community development agency. Gladstone VIC, with its team of 20 volunteer ambassadors works closely with tourism industry operators, visitors, business, local community groups and prospective new community members in a number of different roles.

Alongside promoting leisure opportunities for visitors, the VIC plays a unique role in ‘industrial tourism’ where visitors are given insight into the workings of Gladstone’s industry. This successful blending of nature based and industrial tourism creates a range of experiences that encourage an increased length of stay and visitor spend in the region.

The VIC is also actively involved in generating economic benefits for the region through its efforts to help attract and retain workers and their families. Through free local tours and information, the VIC staff and ambassadors showcase the city and region to new and prospective residents and assist with their relocation.

Testimonial

"The Gladstone Tondoon Gardens are extremely proud to be a tourism partner of the Gladstone Scenic and Tondoon Botanic Gardens Tour which many state and interstate visitors enjoy participating in. In a progressive city such as Gladstone, it is certainly wonderful to have experienced Ambassadors who share their knowledge of our fantastic city with visitors and locals. Their continued enthusiasm and knowledge is to be commended.”

Merilyn Haigh
Gladstone Tondoon Botanic Gardens
Best practice in promoting tourism and industry

Industry Tours
GAPDL has taken advantage of Gladstone’s position of being home to a number of impressive industries, including one of the largest Alumina Refineries in the world, Queensland’s largest Power Station and Australia’s largest Smelter. The Gladstone VIC team offer free industry tours to allow visitors and residents to explore the inner workings of these industrial giants and gain insight into their economic contribution to the region.

Through the industry tours visitors also have the unique opportunity to observe how tourism and industry coexist in a mutually beneficial way, which is a rarity among many other industrial communities in Australia.

The free industry tours run each weekday from 90 minutes to three hours, between March and November. The tours are supported by Gladstone Ports Corporation and Rio Tinto.

Relocation Assistance
VIC staff and ambassadors make a significant contribution to the success of Gladstone’s industry through the assistance they provide in attracting and retaining high quality staff. Relocation tours have been developed by the Gladstone VIC to showcase the city and its key community assets such as schools, hospitals and leisure facilities to potential employees. The Tondoon Botanic Gardens and Gladstone Scenic Tour, for example, is a free tour held every Wednesday afternoon between March and November.

The free, professionally guided tours exemplify the commitment of the Gladstone VIC to the local communities and industries in the Gladstone Region. GAPDL offers this service to enhance the recruitment process by educating new or prospective employees on the benefits of making the move to the Gladstone Region. Experienced consultants are also on hand to familiarise new employees with their adopted environment.

VIC staff and ambassadors also go out of their way to facilitate an easy relocation to Gladstone for new residents through the assistance they offer from picking them up on arrival, securing accommodation and providing advice and mobilising local support as needed.

The VIC prides itself on the high level of customer service provided to visitors and residents. It is committed to a regular training program where all VIC staff and ambassadors complete relevant training in Tour Guiding and Tourism Services, including attending Aussie Host Customer Service Training.

Contribution towards ‘Region of Choice’ summit
The VIC contributes to the local community and economy in a number of other ways, including coordinating the annual Gladstone Region Economic Development Conference, the ‘Region of Choice’ summit. The conference brings together key stakeholders in the community to highlight growth opportunities in industry, business and tourism.

Visiting delegates to the region experience the professionalism, knowledge and warmth of the VIC ambassadors through the hosting and guided tours they offer.
Performance and measures of success

The VIC has been recognised for its considerable contribution to the community through its recent award for the outstanding contribution of the volunteers with the free industry and botanical garden tours.

To maintain high levels of service delivery, VIC ambassadors regularly conduct visitor surveys to gauge levels of satisfaction and performance, and identify issues. Results are reported back to GAPDL along with its sales tracking results, stock management and turnover activities.

The VIC ambassadors are always highly regarded for their personal and professional approach as tour guides and their efforts to go above and beyond for new-comers to the region, as well as other important visitors. Without the dedication of the staff, GAPDL would not be able to provide the tours and assistance they provide to visitors and new residents.

The VIC’s strong performance is demonstrated by its successful coordination of the annual Gladstone Region Economic Development Conference. The graph below highlights the success in revenue earned from ticket sales and sponsorship over the 2010 and 2011 period. Ticket sales for this forum have increased by an estimated 25 percent between 2010 and 2011, with revenue generated from sponsorship more than doubling during the same period.

Ingredients for success

Some important ingredients for VIC success include:

- Develop sound, professional relationships and partnerships with broader community groups and industry to allow the VIC to provide a high level of service and assistance to visitors and residents.
- Deliver value-added services beyond traditional tourism information to local businesses, the community and new residents.
- Communicate the benefits for the broader business sector and the community of positive engagement of the tourism industry with heavy industry.
- Acknowledge the critical value of the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) market to tourism in Gladstone and the surrounding region, with the large number of international, interstate and intrastate workers in the area.
- Engage with Tourism Queensland and the Gladstone Regional Council regularly to ensure GAPDL and the VIC take advantage of the support and strategic advice available.
- Secure GAPDL support and resources to assist in attracting the right mix of volunteers and train them to the required level.
- Ensure communication with the community acknowledges the importance of Gladstone’s tourism role as part of the region’s economic development program.
- Manage the requirements to maintain a regular staff presence at community and industry events.
- Secure sponsorship and support to cover increasing operational costs and enable the free tours to be provided.
Ipswich VIC’s commitment to incorporating digital solutions into their tourism information provision is delivering benefits for visitors and the industry.

Ipswich is centrally located in the South East Queensland region of Australia. To the east is the capital city Brisbane and to the west are the rural and agricultural areas of the Lockyer and Fassifern Valleys, locally known as Queensland’s ‘salad bowl’.

Opened to the public in April 2003, the Ipswich Visitor Information Centre (VIC) stands within the magnificent setting of Queens Park on the main entry road into Ipswich from Brisbane. For those dropping in, there is ample parking at the VIC off this major thoroughfare.

The VIC provides a comprehensive suite of visitor services and facilities to enhance the visitor’s Ipswich experience including:

- Brochures, maps, guides on products and experiences in the region and its neighbours, the Scenic Rim, Toowoomba and the Ranges and Warwick, Stanthorpe
- Emergency travel assistance for lost passports and tickets
- Welcome Packs for conferences and events
- Guided Heritage Tours

What makes this VIC operation stand out as best practice is its strategic business decision and commitment to combine traditional methods with innovative digital solutions to deliver visitor services. The VIC has enthusiastically embraced the growing digital environment in a number of ways:

- Providing a ‘Discover Ipswich’ destination website (www.discoveripswich.com.au) with an online booking facility
- Communicating with visitors and industry through the ‘Discover Ipswich’ Facebook page
- Promoting the region through YouTube
- Hosting digital marketing presentations for local and regional tourism businesses
- Providing a free online booking service for accommodation, tours and attractions
- Providing event ticketing and a Ticketmaster Agency
- Communicating with visitors and industry via regular e-newsletters

The VIC embeds their digital initiatives in their annual business plan. These initiatives are developed in consultation with the Ipswich City Council’s (Council) Information Technology (IT) team. Council is rapidly embracing new technologies and multi-media strategies which support the Centre’s digital ambitions.

The Centre employs three full time staff members, one casual and a team of 29 volunteers. A strong volunteer base with a willingness to engage enthusiastically with visitors is a vital component of the VIC’s success.

The VIC and Council are dedicated to providing regular professional development opportunities for the VIC team. Training includes a focus on ensuring staff and volunteers have the skills and confidence to operate comfortably in a digital environment.

Testimonial

“The Ipswich Visitor Information Centre is a key part of our marketing strategy to promote The Workshops Rail Museum to visitors to the city. Locals, past visitors, and those yet to visit Ipswich, can engage with the region and keep information through digital platforms including the highly visited destination website, Facebook page and regular e-newsletters.”

Glenn Price
Marketing & Sales Manager, The Workshops Rail Museum, Queensland Museum
Engaging with the digital environment

The Ipswich VIC is committed to adopting new technology that will enable them to deliver quality service to visitors and the tourism industry. Their innovative approach is supported by Council and the local tourism industry. Since late 2008, the VIC has used the BookEasy automated reservation and content management system. The Centre’s personal computers and cash register are connected via a network hub allowing VIC staff to track merchandise, stock-flows and sales using Sharplynx Point of Sale software. The VIC Manager is able to generate detailed sales reports both daily as well as on a month by month basis to review performance and measure this against set targets.

The ‘Discover Ipswich’ website (www.discoveripswich.com.au) was launched in September 2008 and has experienced strong growth in visitation over the last three years. As a recent innovation, the VIC partnered with a local theatre company to provide distribution and sales facilities for its productions via the ‘Discover Ipswich’ website. Following a positive response to this initiative a formal ticketing arrangement has been secured.

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Distribution of regular e-newsletters is another successful digital initiative by the Centre. The VIC team manages a direct mail database to distribute information to both industry partners and consumers.

During emergencies and other events that require regular news updates, the Centre’s digital communications play an important role. Following the flood events in the region in January 2011, the Centre established a system where accommodation providers across the region receive essential updates via their mobile phones.

“**If the VIC doesn’t use social media effectively, how can we ask and expect our industry to do so?**”

Michael Williams, Ipswich VIC

A goal of the VIC is to link all social media tools so messages are consistent. Stories posted on Facebook link back to the ‘Discover Ipswich’ website and also highlight links to both tourism operator websites and Facebook pages.

The Centre intends to launch a weekly ‘Did You Know’ post that will inform ‘Discover Ipswich’ Facebook fans about some of the more unique and quirky experiences available in Ipswich. The posts will link to local tourism business listings on the ‘Discover Ipswich’ website.

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Performance and measures of success

The Ipswich VIC has been recognised for its impressive performance. The Centre was the recipient of the 2011 Queensland Tourism Award for Visitor Information and Services and was also awarded bronze at the 2011 Australian Tourism Awards in the same category.

As with all business related activity, the Ipswich VIC team realise the importance of regularly monitoring and reviewing progress towards their digital related goals. This review process informs strategic direction and ensures activities are focussed and delivering on Council and VIC communication goals. Currently the VIC Manager uses a mix of both quantitative and qualitative information to review the digital performance of the Centre including:

- The number of subscribers to e-newsletters
- The number of visits and duration of visit to the Discover Ipswich website
- The number of likes on the Discover Ipswich Facebook page
- The number and total value of bookings entered into the BookEasy automated reservation system
- The number of click-throughs achieved from a digital advertisement placed on an external website
- The revenue generated by the coin-operated public internet kiosk in the VIC

In addition, anecdotal feedback from industry and key stakeholders is sought.

Discover Ipswich website

Graph 1 highlights the significant increase in activity on the ‘Discover Ipswich’ website over the last three years, especially in 2011/12. This is the result of the Centre’s efforts to engage with tourism operators and visitors via this medium, using radio campaigns and other initiatives to direct people to the website for deals or special offers.

During the first two months of a recent cooperative ‘Discover Ipswich’ campaign, total visitation to the ‘Discover Ipswich’ website increased by 48 percent from the previous 12 months. In addition, the number of unique visitors to the site increased by 57 percent during the same period. On average, operators participating in the campaign have seen a 79 percent increase in visits to their listing on the Discover Ipswich website, a 72 percent increase in click-throughs to their own websites, and in increase in new business.

Following the finalisation of this ‘Discover Ipswich’ cooperative campaign, the VIC will survey the 17 participating operators to evaluate and quantify their bookings and sales performance in more detail. This feedback will be used to evaluate the return on investment for both operator and Council contributions to the campaign.

e-newsletter

The VIC currently has over 1,000 subscribers to their e-newsletter, which represents an annual increase of 56% from June 2011. With a greater focus on digital marketing and communications, the Centre plans to double this figure through to June 2013, by targeting potential subscribers through consumer shows, digital advertising and collateral development.

Ipswich Visitors Guide

The 2011/12 Ipswich Visitors Guide was the first edition to be made available as a fully interactive, online guide. This coincided with a reduction in the quantity of printed versions to 40,000 from 50,000. The cost saving associated with this reduction was over $3,500.
Future IT opportunities

With the support of the tourism industry and, importantly, the Ipswich City Council, the VIC is pursuing a number of IT opportunities, including Wi-Fi installation, an iPad application and a mobile-ready web portal.

In addition, the next stage of development for the ‘Discover Ipswich’ YouTube presence is underway. The VIC team will be encouraging local tourism businesses to supply the Centre with video footage of their product and experiences to upload to the channel. Operators can embed videos on the ‘Discover Ipswich’ website and share these via YouTube and Facebook. These videos will also be available for viewing by physical visitors to the VIC via an iPad or touch screen that accesses the ‘Discover Ipswich’ YouTube channel.

The VIC’s future strategy for delivering its visitor services is very much ‘multi-media’, using a range of communication channels, including traditional media. The Council has thrown its support behind the expansion of digital technology, with Ipswich one of the first cities to be involved in the National Broadband Network roll-out.

Ingredients for success

Some important ingredients for VIC success include:

- Develop strong relationships with the Regional Tourism Organisation and Council to achieve their buy-in and support for the VIC’s goals. Networking with RTOs and LTOs is of such importance that it is an essential criteria of the VIC accreditation program.
- Partner with local businesses and organisations to increase the success of the VIC website and create improved business and profitable outcomes for everyone involved.
- Ensure local accommodation providers and tourism operators are informed of the VIC business strategies and digital plans as their support and participation will be a cornerstone of the final delivery (e.g. product offerings and packaging for ‘web-based offers’ and competitions).
- Identify and understand key target markets in order to make informed business decisions and tailor the region’s marketing approach.
- Don’t ignore traditional marketing techniques. Digital technology can provide a cost efficient method of delivering information to the consumer or visitor, but should only be one component in the VIC’s marketing arsenal.

- Don’t underestimate the power of an actual person assisting a visitor. While the demand for Wi-Fi, smart-phone apps and other such technologies has been steadily increasing, personal engagement is still critical to a VIC’s success.
- Ensure staff and volunteers have the skills and knowledge to deliver the mix of marketing messages and communications you send. Training and educating all staff in new and innovative technology and multi-media devices is a must. While it can be costly and time-consuming, the long-term benefits will deliver a better outcome.
- Incorporate individual interests and prior knowledge and experience in the education and training program for the VIC volunteers on the use of the internet and other digital tools. Including subject matter they are familiar and interested in will help the volunteers to adapt and apply the tool more readily.
- Ensure there are always volunteers on duty at the Centre familiar with current technology and able to share their knowledge with volunteers less confident.
- Be realistic about how digital technology can be applied in the VIC environment.

Testimonial

“The Ipswich Visitor Information Centre plays a key role in supporting the Ipswich Tourism Operators Network (ITON). Businesses in our network have a page on the ‘Discover Ipswich’ website and their brochures are displayed at the Centre. The regular consumer e-newsletters that the centre distributes support our operators’ special offers and news items.”

Cr David Pahlke
Chair of the Ipswich Tourism Operators Network
Julia Creek (At the Creek) Visitor Information Centre

Insights into how a region can support the growth of tourism to diversify from the region’s core industries of beef and mining and create economic and social benefits.

Development of the Tourist Interpretive Centre and Visitor Information Centre for Julia Creek was part of McKinlay Shire Council’s vision to enhance community amenities and raise the profile of local and regional tourism. The Council wanted to encourage a thriving tourism industry to diversify from the region’s core industries of beef and mining and generate additional economic, social and cultural benefits back to the region.

At the Creek is a combined tourist attraction and visitor information centre that has been created through a funding partnership between McKinlay Shire, the Queensland State Government and the private sector, including support from BHP Billiton.

Julia Creek’s At the Creek facility in northwest Queensland is located along the Overlander’s Way, a tourist drive between Tennant Creek and Townsville.

At the Creek opened in 2009 and is now an accredited Visitor Information Centre (VIC) managed by two paid staff members. The Centre promotes local, regional and interstate tourism products, providing a range of brochures and maps for the local area, Outback Queensland and Gulf district towns.

The Centre also provides residents and tourists with a high quality, safe, interactive, and educational venue. The story of life in Julia Creek and the McKinlay Shire is brought to life through the three themes of water, country and people.

McKinlay Shire Council, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and Southern Gulf Catchment are currently developing the Julia Creek Dunnart Recovery and Captive Breeding Program as part of Stage 2 development of the Centre. The Dunnart will be the focus of future commercial product and educational opportunities at the VIC.

Testimonial

"Stage 2 of ‘At the Creek’ is a world class tourist attraction. This newly constructed infrastructure explores the relationship between above and below ground within the Mitchell Grass Downs Bio-region of the McKinlay Shire. The aim of this display is to broaden visitor’s knowledge of the Julia Creek Dunnart and to raise awareness of this endangered animal within Australia.

The newly completed project will stimulate economic development in the region by increasing tourist numbers. This will create opportunity for growth for existing and new business within the McKinlay Shire."

Shane Cagney
Chief Executive Officer
McKinlay Shire Council
Julia Creek VIC’s economic contribution

At the Creek has a strong commercial focus in support of Council’s aim to increase economic diversity and reduce the reliance on any one industry for the region’s economic security.

The Centre provides a tour booking service and handles bookings for local flights. Visitors are able to experience the interpretative displays located in the Centre and local products and other merchandise are available for purchase.

Additional commercial opportunities are planned as part of the Stage 2 development of the Centre. A new attraction, an Eco-Interpretive Centre is to be developed with funding assistance from BHP Billiton and the Queensland Government’s Q150 grant.

The highlight of the attraction will be a nocturnal display, housing the threatened Julia Creek Dunnart. A Dunnart sanctuary will also be established. Council is partnering with the University of Queensland to supply Dunnarts for display and for conservation research purposes.

The current theme of ‘water, country and people’ will be extended as part of Stage 2 with the addition of graphics and audio panels to provide visitors with an appreciation of the geological significance of the Mitchell Grass Downs bio-region.

Council is also developing a walking trail and caravan park in Julia Creek to encourage the self-drive market to stay longer and engage with the environment through At the Creek.

At the Creek and the immediate precinct will continue to be progressed as a development priority with a strong commercial focus.

Performance and measures of success

The Centre is part of Council’s business planning program and its performance is monitored and regularly reported.

At the Creek tracks visitation, revenue streams and expenses including the capital cost and outlays required for the Stage 2 development. Forecast percentage increases in revenue are estimated at between 4.5 and 5 percent per annum over the next ten years. This is indicative of the forward planning and performance expectations following completion of Stage 2.

Many measures of success (e.g. visitor numbers and retail spend) are dependent on factors intrinsic to regional tourism, especially in remote and seasonal areas such as seasonality and extreme weather events. Graph 1 shows the 12 month revenue movements for At the Creek in 2011. The Centre has to work hard to counter the seasonal impact on visitor numbers and revenue particularly during the wetter summer months.
Ingredients for success

Some important ingredients for VIC success include:

- Secure Council’s support as the local champion to drive regional tourism development. This is critical when the local industry is small and under-resourced.
- Identify a unique feature or element that underpins the local ‘story.’ In Julia Creek Council has developed a strategy around the endangered Dunnart and the connections between ‘people, country and water’.
- Engage with the community to capture and present residents’ stories to provide a personal element to the Centre.
- Develop strong partnerships with the private sector and Queensland Government. The Mayor and Council’s CEO’s relationship building has been essential in progressing Stage 2 of At the Creek.
- Secure the support of local industry. In this region working with BHP Billiton’s Cannington Mine in developing long term tourism opportunities. The ‘Living Strategic Plan’ is a shared vision for local and regional development, which BHP Billiton contributes to.
- Work with stakeholders to provide quality road infrastructure to increase north-south traffic.
- Work with the Regional Tourism Organisation to market Outback Queensland as a tourist destination as an important and ongoing task.
- Manage the impacts of seasonal tourism in a remote regional centre and maintain the momentum in the quiet periods.
- Communicate At the Creek’s successes and its contribution to local and regional tourism development.
- Ensure funding partners, such as BHP Billiton, are recognised for their contributions and the role they play in creating a sustainable community.

Testimonial

“This project was developed as an educational facility to educate visitors, school and locals of all ages about McKinlay Shire’s bio-region, and to escalate the knowledge base of the Julia Creek Dunnart. All involved are hoping that the project will increase visitation numbers within the shire.

Stage 2 will be officially opened by Local Government Minister David Crisafulli on December 12th 2012.”

Belinda Murphy
Mayor
McKinlay Shire Council
Mission Beach is located on the Queensland coast between Cairns and Townsville. It is bound by World Heritage rainforest and the World Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef. Tourism is the region’s most important industry, worth an estimated $100 million to the economy. It employs over 20,000 people in Tropical North Queensland.

The Mission Beach Visitor Information Centres (VIC) primary focus is generating business for the local tourism industry and welcoming visitors to the region.

The VIC is managed by Mission Beach Business and Tourism (MBBT), the region’s peak tourism body. The VIC also receives support in the way of funding and office space from Cassowary Coast Regional Council (Council).

“In the early hours of February 3, 2011, Category 5 Cyclone Yasi crossed the Australian coast at Mission Beach between Cairns and Townsville, bringing peak wind gusts estimated at 285km per hour. Within hours, the staff of Mission Beach Tourism began their dedicated and determined journey in restoring the region’s tourism industry.”

Angi Matveyeff
Manager, Mission Beach Tourism

The worst affected areas were Tully, Silkwood, Mission Beach, Innisfail and Cardwell. Cyclone Yasi also caused massive damage to the resort infrastructure at Hayman, Dunk, and Bedarra islands and the surrounding communities.

The VIC took a lead role in cyclone recovery efforts and was integral in the communications to all levels of government, media and the relatives of visitors and residents who were in the region. The VIC was also heavily involved in ensuring the housing and well-being of volunteer, paid, government and army personnel who came to the region to help in the rebuilding efforts.

More than a year later, parts of the region are still feeling the impacts. Key tourism infrastructure, such as local jetties, need to be re-built and some parts of the national park remain in a poor state.

**Testimonial**

“Mission Beach and surrounding regions suffered both structural and much vegetation damage, but after dusting ourselves off, we went immediately into recovery mode. We have made great steps forward and appreciate the number of visitors that are continuing to choose Mission Beach as their preferred holiday destination.”

Mission Beach Business and Tourism
Mission Beach VIC's Crisis Response Strategies

The Sydney Morning Herald observed, "Yasi almost killed the region’s tourism industry, even though it inflicted minimal damage on Cairns and the main north Queensland tourism centres".

The VIC played a significant part in supporting the industry through a difficult period and assisting in the recovery efforts.

Before Cyclone Yasi reached the coast VIC phones were transferred to the VIC Manager’s mobile. This meant as long as the mobile could be powered up, communications were not disrupted. The VIC Manager then moved operations to Castaway’s Resort and Spa which had an alternative power supply. While the VIC building was not severely damaged there was no power to run computers or phones.

The relocated VIC resumed activity with the help of some of their volunteer staff prior to restoration of power and communications and was fully operational within hours of the cyclone passing.

Following Cyclone Yasi, the VIC then became heavily involved in the region’s immediate stabilisation and coordination efforts. A series of innovative strategies and actions were initiated and supported by the VIC in response to the crisis.

- **Response Strategy 1**: Immediately after Cyclone Yasi, providing regularly updated information on the VIC website and Facebook page on the status of accommodation, activities and restaurants/cafes. This was crucial to the immediate recovery of the local industry and region, as well to the comfort of relatives of those caught up in the event.

- **Response Strategy 2**: Making the VIC available as a hub for community meetings, briefings and information sessions. This included sessions with insurance companies and assessors. An information board was also erected that could be regularly updated.

- **Response Strategy 3**: Establishing a comprehensive database of accommodation. Post Cyclone Yasi, with no telecommunications, VIC staff drove throughout the region to audit accommodation capable of operating and housing recovery workers. Within a week, a comprehensive database listing vacancies, contact details, location and catering available was posted on the VIC’s website home page, www.missionbeachtourism.com. The website was updated twice daily.

- **Response Strategy 4**: Coordinating the delivery of new/clean linen from various facilities in Cairns. As a result, many accommodation facilities in Mission Beach were operating within days of the disaster.

- **Response Strategy 5**: Looking for opportunities to boost the economy. Within days of the cyclone crossing the coast, the VIC developed a quirky strategy. A ‘Yasi’ caricature was developed to promote the Yasi Community Benefit Concert and put on a sticker to encourage local spend. The sticker was not for sale and only available by making a purchase at local retail outlets in the Cassowary Coast Local Government Area. This was followed by the development of specific Yasi merchandise products including t-shirts and stubby coolers.

- **Response Strategy 6**: Boosting community morale, with a community YouTube video produced featuring locals who were asked to dance without warning or accompanying music. It was professionally edited free-of-charge and uploaded, and can be accessed via the VIC website www.missionbeachtourism.com. Used as both a Christmas gift to the community and a marketing tool, it captured the essence of the community and it became one of Mission Beach VIC’s most popular online videos.

- **Response Strategy 7**: Reinvigorating interest in the region through a number of local Mission Beach tourism operators travelling to Europe with the support of the State and Federal Government to be part of the ‘Europe on Tour’ sales mission. Where businesses could not attend to promote their product, the VIC and/or local tourism organisation represented their interests. A quick response code (QR code) was created for the sales mission, which linked off and online information. One hundred lollypops with the QR code sticker were sent to Europe as part of the promotional efforts. A webpage was also created for the wholesalers and product managers, providing information about Mission Beach and links to other areas of the website. The campaign titled ‘So Sweet to Meet You’ proved extremely successful.

- **Response Strategy 8**: Working to recapture the vital drive market with powerful and vibrant billboard messages. Paradise Outdoor Advertising donated a six month, $17,000 billboard to help the local industry.

- **Response Strategy 9**: Facilitating those operators that were open and able to accept visitors to participate in the ‘Open for Business’ marketing and promotional campaign. The campaign was organised through Tourism Queensland (TQ) and supported by the State and Federal Government’s Flood and Cyclone recovery activity. The VIC was integral in collating local information and disseminating it to both TQ and Tourism Australia.
Performance and measures of success

Prior to Cyclone Yasi, the VIC did not have a documented disaster management or crisis management plan, rather they ‘relied on gut instinct’. Council’s plan focussed on community safety and harm minimisation for local residents, rather than immediate economic recovery. There was a notable gap.

After Cyclone Yasi, the MBBT Board developed a business plan and a comprehensive disaster management plan for the VIC. The disaster management plan is a living document, which community leaders and key industry personnel contribute to annually, and prior to cyclone season.

In 2010-11, Mission Beach VIC received over 33,000 visitors, only a one percent decrease on the previous year despite the region suffering negative impacts from Tropical Cyclone Yasi in this period.

Ingredients for success

Some important ingredients for VIC success in handling crises include:

- Keep open the lines of communication. The Centre deliberately focused its efforts on communication and facilitation to enable the region to recover and rebuild in a timely manner.
- Understand how to best to use multi-media communication channels including SMS and social media during a crisis to provide accurate and timely information to ‘the outside world’ and manage perceptions of the crisis.
- Be accurate and sensitive in communicating when businesses are ready and open to trade. Local businesses need to generate income as quickly as possible after a crisis. Mission Beach VIC was well placed to facilitate this activity by disseminating information on what was available and operational to visitors both while in the region and before they left home.
- Remain positive but don’t over promise. A key lesson learnt by the Queensland tourism industry following Cyclone Yasi and the summer 2010-11 floods is that careful consideration needs to be given to the messages being delivered; think before you hit send! The media will pick up on the sensationalist, and too many negative messages following an event of this nature can have medium and long term impacts on tourism and local businesses.
- Plan early for success. Write a Crisis Management Plan NOW! Work with Council and other stakeholders to develop strategies and actions that will maximise response efforts across the region.
- Understand the role of the VIC in a crisis in the region and work closely with Council to improve coordination in managing crisis events.
- Audit the region to establish and maintain an accommodation database that is always current. All key stakeholders across the region (Councils, the Regional Tourism Organisation, etc.) recognise the value of the accommodation database as a successful action and strategy developed during the crisis, which will be core to responding to future events.
- Make use of local offers of support. The ability and willingness of the local tourism industry to assist cannot be undervalued. Following Cyclone Yasi, the Chairman of MBBT gave the VIC staff access to facilities, resources and office equipment to undertake immediate recovery activities.
- Work with all stakeholders to complete a regional and localised assessment of the successes and failures to disaster responses.

Testimonial

“As well as coordinating recovery information immediately after Cyclone Yasi, the Mission Beach VIC provided leadership and inspiration to the whole business and tourism community by their ‘we get up again’ approach. Not only up again but better than before.”

(Former) Councillor Jennifer Downs
Cassowary Coast Regional Council.
Moreton Bay is one of South East Queensland’s most diverse areas. It is a rapidly growing region offering a range of leisure and tourism experiences based on distinct inland and coastal towns.

Instrumental to the growth of tourism in the Moreton Bay region is the successful operation of six accredited Visitor Information Centres (VICs) across Moreton Bay including Redcliffe, Pine Rivers, Clontarf, Cabooyture, Moreton Bay Hinterland (Woodford) and Bribie Island. The VIC network ensures visitors can readily access the region’s accommodation, attractions and experiences.

Committed to delivering quality holiday and recreational information to visitors and the local community, Redcliffe City Council first developed a holistic volunteer training program in 1997, and in 2008 Moreton Bay Regional Council (Council) embarked on further developing and implementing across the entire region a best practice volunteer program.

The VICs are operated by a paid Tourism Coordinator and the commitment of 170 volunteers who give their time, energy and knowledge. The services offered to visitors and residents include:

- Information on all regions across Queensland
- Volunteers with language skills to assist non-English speaking visitors. Including German, Spanish, Italian, Swiss, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Arabic, Japanese, Afrikaans, Pilipino and Tagalog
- Simple fact sheets with quick, up-to-date information as well as regional and local visitor guides
- A 1800 freecall number (at Caboolture and Clontarf)
- Internet kiosks, free WiFi Hotspot and touchscreens with Quick Response codes to assist travellers
- Free tour guides for visiting bus groups (available with advance notice)
- Provision of welcome packs to new residents and international groups
- Presentations to local schools
- Accommodation availability service
- Art space facility to display local arts and crafts at Redcliffe
- Parking for motorhomes.

To ensure a consistently high level of service delivery by the VICs, Council developed and implemented a comprehensive volunteer training program with a strong emphasis on customer service. This training program has been instrumental in elevating the service and quality of delivery by the volunteers to best practice.

The volunteer program offers a valuable opportunity for local residents to develop new skills, create new social networks, meet like-minded people and gain a sense of achievement and satisfaction from making a positive difference to others.

Through the active engagement in the community, and support for the operation of the VICs across the region, the VIC volunteers have become an important asset to the Moreton Bay community.

Testimonial

“The Volunteers and Visitor Centres do an extremely important job in Redcliffe. To us they are a real standout in the Redcliffe community and of great benefit for those visiting our beautiful Peninsula. Congratulations on a very well run community project.”

Peter Savage
La Vida on Anzac
Establishment of a best practice volunteer program

The Moreton Bay VICS are an industry leader in visitor information centre management. This is due in part to the regional approach of Council in providing visitor information across six centres; and to the volunteers’ participation in extensive customer service and professional development training.

The award winning team of volunteers won the Queensland tourism award for ‘Outstanding Volunteer Group’ in 2010. Then in 2012 the Woodford VIC volunteers won ‘Outstanding Achievement by a Volunteer Group’ at the 2012 Moreton Bay and Islands Tourism Awards.

These outstanding results were achieved in partnership; together Council and the Tourism Coordinator developed an innovative volunteer training program that was designed to be applicable to a large volunteer base, while ensuring consistent outcomes such as high quality customer service.

The volunteer training program has been modified from a customer service program delivered at a local TAFE facility to focus on the specific needs of volunteers.

The topics covered include:
- Tourism industry overview
- Working with colleagues and customers
- Working in a socially diverse environment
- Basic sales skills and tools
- Telephone etiquette
- Opening and closing and office security
- Organising information
- Booking tours and accommodation
- Product knowledge.

A comprehensive Volunteering Handbook is also provided to each volunteer on commencement with Council. The information is for volunteers, supervisors and coordinators and includes recruitment, communication, dress code and training and development. A new volunteer buddy system also provides newer volunteers with the chance to work along-side those volunteers who have been actively volunteering for some time and have a strong customer service focus.

To make sure each volunteer receives the right training they are interviewed by the Tourism Coordinator prior to commencement to gain an understanding of their skills and experience. New volunteers are also observed during their initial recruitment phase and through the buddy system. Training is then scheduled to ensure customer service and delivery standards are maintained or exceeded at the VICS.

Performance and measures of success

Council has created a large and strong volunteer network without which it would not be able to service the six VICS across the region. The volunteer network enables these VICS to operate at a fraction of the cost of employing part-time and casual staff. In return, the local economy benefits from the growing number of visitors.

Collectively the six centres have handle over 75,000 visitor enquiries, via walk-ins, telephone calls, faxes and emails in a twelve months period.

Visitor numbers to the VIC network are increasing each year. The award winning Woodford VIC, for example, has experienced a steady growth in numbers since its opening in December 2010. The dedicated volunteers handled just under 14,000 information requests in 2011/12 making it the fastest growing centre in the region.

As a testament to the quality of the volunteers, Council regularly seeks the support of VIC volunteers for a range of community events including:
- Educational programs, such as pelican checking and management
- Free guided tours
- Staffing of information tents at local and regional business and community events
- A roving information distribution service at beaches, parks and other recreation areas, which further contributes to community engagement goals.

The volunteer training program is reviewed annually as part of the business planning for the VICS to ensure best practice in service delivery by the volunteers. A peer review is also undertaken by the Queensland Information Centres Association (QICA) network and increasingly, through collaboration with other VICS. This review recognises the changing role and needs of volunteers along with Council’s expectations of volunteers.

The comprehensive nature of the training materials and volunteer resources including the Volunteer Handbook demonstrate the commitment of Council to investing in the volunteer network and the value of the volunteers to the local economy. The volunteer training program now provides a benchmark for all volunteer programs within Council and can be readily adapted as learning tools for volunteers across a range of other industries.
Ingredients for success

Some important ingredients for VIC success in delivering a successful volunteer program include:

- Secure Council’s commitment to developing and delivering a volunteer training program in a timely and practical fashion that recognises:
  - Need for flexibility and ease of implementation. Volunteers should be able to access units or elements of the program in their own time
  - VIC volunteers are typically geographically dispersed, have differing technical abilities and experience
  - Need for adaptability, so the program can be modified to suit a particular group or individual’s needs
- Volunteers require strong management and engagement to ensure a consistent level of service delivery. Combined with their passion and enthusiasm, they are the most effective sellers of the region.
- Engage a Tourism Coordinator to develop the volunteer network.
- Understand the different needs of VIC customers and reflect those in the training and service delivery.
- Acknowledge the benefits of active participation in QICA which provides a valuable sounding board for further development of the volunteer program.
- Recognise that managing and evolving the volunteer program is time-consuming and intensive.
- Look for opportunities to adapt volunteer training program’s materials as learning tools for a range of other volunteers.
- Maintain regular and consistent communication across a large and geographical dispersed volunteer base.
- Review and update the volunteer training program to ensure relevant information and learning techniques are included.
- Engage with VICs outside of the region to build relationships and share learnings.
- Ensure regional and state tourism organisations understand the role and operational challenges of a volunteer workforce and the value of VICs in delivering visitor and community services.

Testimonial

“I just want to let all of the hard working volunteers know that their efforts as ambassadors for tourism in our region are what makes people keep coming back. One recent day-tripper to the Peninsula, from Manly, said we went to the Clontarf info centre, the staff were so helpful. We never realized how much there was to see around here and it is such a pretty place that we won’t go to the Gold Coast or Sunshine Coast next time we want to go out for a Sunday, but come here instead.

Thanks so very much you lovely Volunteers - Big pat on the back for each of you as you deserve it for a job well done!!”.

Tanya Neate
MORETON BAY BIKE HIRE
Toowomba Visitor Information Centre

Valuable insights into how the Toowomba Visitor Information Centre connects with the local community to foster its growth and development.

The Toowomba Visitor Information Centre (VIC) is operated and funded by Toowomba Regional Council (Council) to facilitate tourism growth within the Toowomba region.

Setting apart Toowomba from other VICs is the significant emphasis placed on developing and maintaining ‘one-on-one’ relationships with community leaders and tourism partner organisations.

The VIC’s volunteer program is critical to its success in creating strong links with the local community and providing a valuable community resource.

The VIC has a committed team of 80 volunteers that take pride in promoting the city and region, and have a genuine interest in helping people. The volunteers are supported by three staff.

A valuable function of the VIC is its support of community events. The VIC operates Toowoomba’s online Regional Events Register to showcase events occurring in and around the region for the community and visitors and assists in promoting and hosting community and regional events, functions and meetings.

Staff and volunteers are also actively involved in providing information and support to visitors and the local community during crisis events.

To support local producers and ensure visitors experience ‘local flavours’ the VIC dedicates around 50 percent of the centre’s floor space to displays of local produce and gifts.

Testimonial

"The Visitor Information Centre provided a vital service in assisting the thousands of visitors to the Toowomba Region during the Carnival of Flowers. They are committed to ensuring the accuracy of event details and providing a cheerful first point of contact for Carnival attendees wishing to partake in bus tours, visit the Exhibition Gardens or purchase seating at the Floral Parade. The Toowomba Carnival of Flowers relies heavily on the extensive knowledge and capabilities of the Visitor Information Centre staff in ensuring the event is a fantastic experience for all involved."

Melissa Kite
Event Coordinator – Toowomba Carnival of Flowers
The Toowoomba VICs role in community development

Community events
The VIC works in partnership with Toowoomba Conferences and other event organisers to actively support community events, including:
- Distributing event information, collating and distributing conference destination guides and delegate packs, providing accommodation referrals and arranging pre and post conference tour options.
- Collating information, briefing the event staff and volunteers and providing the ground support for visitors throughout big events such as the Toowoomba Carnival of Flowers.
- Coordinating and assisting key community events such as Anzac Day, Australia Day, Queensland Day and New Year Eve fireworks.
- Regularly engaging with local attractions, educational institutions and community service to create positive community exposure and constructive community engagement.

Our community response – 2011 Flood Disaster
VIC staff and volunteers provided an invaluable service during the summer 2010-11 floods to visitors whose travel plans were disrupted by the many road closures in the Toowoomba region and neighbouring towns. Visitors already in Toowoomba on the 10th of January were unable to leave for several days, while inbound visitors were unable to reach the city. For several weeks leading up to, and following the flood, staff and volunteers were exceptionally busy monitoring roads and weather conditions, and providing support to travellers. Toowoomba VIC also assisted locals, fielding enquiries beyond their usual core business, including:
- Emergency accommodation
- Missing persons
- Volunteering
- Relief funding enquiries
- Milk supplies
- Fodder drops for local livestock.

The unprecedented volume of phone calls, visits and emails from residents and people outside Toowoomba during this period demonstrates that the Toowoomba VIC is well prepared and equipped to go above and beyond its usual level of community service when required.

Performance and measures of success
The VIC’s strong performance in supporting (financially and logistically) key community and regional events is measured through increasing event registration numbers and page views of event listings on the VIC website.

A 9.8 percent increase in visitor enquiries for 2010-2011 highlights the significant role the VIC played during the summer floods (refer to Table 1).

After the summer 2010-11 floods, the centre distributed 20,000 free tickets to the Spirit of the Country music event to help lift community spirits. Following the event, the centre experienced a 260 percent increase in visitor enquiries from March 2010.

Table 1 - Toowoomba Visitor Statistics Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visitor Origin</th>
<th>2010/11</th>
<th>2009/10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counter Enquiries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toowoomba</td>
<td>15,656</td>
<td>10,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brisbane, Sunshine &amp; Gold Coasts</td>
<td>28,799</td>
<td>33,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of Qld</td>
<td>11,017</td>
<td>9,621</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interstate</td>
<td>15,961</td>
<td>16,295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas</td>
<td>6,748</td>
<td>7,287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carnival of Flowers</td>
<td>15,025</td>
<td>14,399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Counter Enquiries</td>
<td>78,181</td>
<td>77,774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Other Enquiries                 |         |         |
| Phone Calls & Emails            | 20,388  | 12,009  |
| Total Other Enquiries           | 20,388  | 12,009  |
| Total Enquiries                 | 98,569  | 89,783  |
| % change over previous year     | 9.79%    |         |
In 2011, over 60 percent of the centre’s volunteers base had celebrated 5 years or more of service including:

- 7 volunteers with 20 years of service
- 11 volunteers with 15 years of service
- 15 volunteers with 10 years of service;
  and
- 10 volunteers with 5 years of service

There is a waiting list of residents wanting to become a volunteer at the centre.

According to the Annual Visitor Satisfaction Survey, in 2011, 80 percent of respondents rated the centre as either 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied) for overall performance.

The VIC has an operational target for a viable retail section within the centre of a ‘customer spend ratio’ of 1. This is calculated by dividing the total retail takings (in dollar terms) by the total number of visitors. Recent results have indicated a positive growth trend in the ratio:

- 2009/10: $1.35 per visitor
- 2010/11: $1.52 per visitor
- 2011/12: $1.83 per visitor

**Ingredients for success**

Some important ingredients for VIC success include:

- Foster positive community relationships and generate economic benefits for the region through the support of community activities.
- Recognise the value of establishing personal relationships with community leaders and face-to-face and phone contact for effective communication.
- Ensure key regional stakeholders and the community are aware of the centre’s successes and regional economic contribution.
- Conduct regular research, such as visitor profile and satisfaction surveys, to ensure the VIC staff and volunteers have current information on visitors’ needs and expectations. (Due to their importance, undertaking visitor profile and satisfaction surveys are ranked as essential criteria under the VIC accreditation program.)
- Leverage Council’s resources in promoting the region to local residents to help increase the visiting friends and relatives (VFR) market.
- Undertake regular business planning and reporting with Council and the RTO to develop and coordinate community focused strategies and ensure consistent messaging.
- Ensure staff and volunteers are well-informed about current events and the latest operator and industry updates and improve volunteer retention rates through regular structured training and product familiarisations, recognition activities, and feedback.
- Allocate floor and wall space to local products, produce and merchandise to encourage community ‘buy-in’ to the centre.
- Keep abreast of changes in tourism product and regional information to ensure information resources are current.
- Support new operators who are entering the tourism industry with limited skills and business knowledge.

**Testimonial**

“The relationship between the Cobb & Co Museum and the Toowoomba VIC is one of mutual support. The Museum invites staff and volunteers from the VIC to annual familiarisations and morning teas encouraging a social atmosphere among the volunteers from both our organisations.

Thank you for your ongoing support for the Cobb & Co Museum.”

**Dr Deborah Tranter**
**Director, Cobb & Co Museum**
Tyto Wetlands Visitor Information Centre

Insights into what makes the Tourism Volunteer Program such a valuable contributor to the community of the Tyto Wetlands Visitor Information Centre.

The Tyto Wetlands Visitor Information Centre (VIC) opened in 2007 to develop and promote tourism within the Hinchinbrook region.

A key feature of the area is the Tyto Wetlands, one of Australia’s largest urban wetland rehabilitation projects. It contains a carefully preserved natural environment integrating lagoons, walking tracks and native flora.

The VIC is fully funded by the Hinchinbrook Shire Council (Council) and is operated by two full-time staff members and 46 volunteers.

The VIC actively engages with the local community through its successful Tourism Volunteer Program and its associated activities including customer service workshops, tourism product familiarisation trips, attendance at community events and participation in fund raising activities.

What sets apart the efforts of this VIC from others is its focus on using the Volunteer Program to help people retiring from paid employment to make this transition in a dignified way and continue to have a sense of contribution to the community.

The VIC houses innovative, interpretative displays showcasing the spectacular natural values of Tyto Wetlands and the Hinchinbrook region, including the Walk through Wetlands and the Tyto Chorus.

The VIC provides comprehensive information on the local and regional areas, as well as other parts of Queensland, and has become a hub for tourism activity, attracting a restaurant and additional services to the precinct.

The VIC works closely with the Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO), Townsville Enterprise Limited and the local tourism association, Tropical Coast Tourism. The centre also values its close connection to the community.

Testimonial

"The role undertaken by staff and volunteers at the Tyto Wetlands Visitor Information Centre continues to deliver integral services to the Hinchinbrook Shire community. In addition to providing assistance to visitors coming to the shire, the operations the visitor centre provides is an invaluable resource for referral to local tourism, retail and other affiliated businesses operating within the shire, with positive economic impacts to the entire community."

Mary Brown
President of Hinchinbrook Chamber of Commerce and owner/operator of NQ Aviation Services and Hinchinbrook Helicopters

Tyto Wetlands, Ingham

Australian Italian Festival, Ingham
Positive community engagement through the VIC volunteer program

A key achievement of the Tyto Wetlands VIC is its Tourism Volunteer Program, which was carried over from the previous Information Centre (Hinchinbrook Visitor Centre). The majority of its 46 volunteers are retired adults.

The Hinchinbrook Volunteer Program (the Program) has one of the largest groups of volunteers in the ‘Great Green Way’ (the regions located between Townsville and Cairns). Through the Program the VIC has developed strong links with the community. The volunteers undertake familiarisation programs, engaging with the local community throughout the Hinchinbrook and surrounding regions. An Annual Open Day is held where the community is invited to the centre to experience the wetlands first hand. Golf buggies are provided for visitors unable to access the walkways.

Volunteers are also a regular presence at community events to host displays and facilitate discussions. The volunteers are actively involved in the annual tree planting day and visiting local primary and high schools, wedding functions and other events are hosted in the centre grounds.

Community fundraising is also a valued role of the volunteers. A group of volunteers from the VIC, the ‘Tyto Tigers’, undertake regular fund raising activities for the Queensland Cancer Council.

A key reason for the success of the Program is the underpinning initiative “How to retire volunteers gracefully.” This initiative is based around the sensitivities of staff relinquishing their duties from mainstream, paid employment, in a manner that ensures sufficient knowledge transfer and to make their transition into the volunteering program as smooth and dignified as possible. The Program also provides a unique opportunity for the newly retired volunteers to continue to feel valued and able to continue to contribute to the community.

A number of activities are undertaken to ensure the success of the Tourism Volunteer Program, including one-on-one training with centre staff and monthly meetings to review issues. The VIC also ensures it meets or exceeds the criteria in the VIC accreditation policy relating to staff induction and training by providing customer service workshops and familiarisation trips to neighbouring regions with a minimum of 6-8 trips scheduled per year.

Performance and measures of success

The VIC has been recognised for its considerable contribution to the community. It won the Queensland Information Centres Association Visitor Centre of the Year Award for 2011, the 2011 North Queensland Tourism Awards for Visitor Information and Services, and was a finalist in 2011 Queensland Tourism awards.

The effectiveness of the VIC is measured as part of Council’s planning and performance feedback process. Performance indicators to measure the success of the Program for 2011/12 include:

- Numbers of volunteers enrolled with the centre
- Volunteer retention rate.

In 2004 the VIC had 40 volunteers and has increased to 46 volunteers in 2012. While the average age of volunteers participating in the program is 70.3 years, there are a number of volunteers in the program nearing the age of 80 years. As a result, Council have extended their volunteer insurance age limit (to 85 years), both in recognition of the contribution these elderly community members make to the VIC and the rise in the average age of volunteers participating in the program.

With several retirements expected from the volunteer program in the near future, VIC management has commenced sensitive and careful planning for recruiting new volunteers to the program to ensure a sufficient volunteer base is maintained into the future.

Sugar Cane Farm, Ingham
Ingredients for success

Some important ingredients for VIC success include:

- Ensure a sound strategy for professional delivery of a Tourism Volunteer Program.
- Engage personally with visitors, locals and key partners through direct one-on-one communication and use electronic communication methods as a supplementary approach.
- Actively participate in community events and have regular engagement with the community.
- Develop close relationships with Regional Tourism and Council staff to ensure all local stakeholders are well informed of activities.
- Use Council’s communication channels to promote VIC activities and successes to local residents.
- Develop relationships with community groups such as the Rotary Club; and gain their support in promoting activities.
- Participate in local, regional and state tourism awards programs as this compels the VIC to regularly review its business and operations systems. This process also creates mechanisms for community interest, publicity and promotion.
- Respect people at all times and encourage staff and volunteers to be proud of the region they represent.
- Keep abreast of advances in technology and up-skill staff accordingly.
- Manage the risk and threat of natural disasters. This is particularly important to the Tyto Wetlands VIC which is located in a flood zone and an area prone to cyclones.
- Ensure key stakeholders have a shared understanding of the role of the VIC, its objectives and deliverables.

Testimonial

“I believe our centre’s success comes primarily from its people - both volunteers and staff over the past years. We have a genuine love for, and deep personal connection with each other and I and the other staff members consider the volunteers to be part of our family. I believe the warmth, respect and affection we share shines through and visitors react to that.”

Rae Domin
Tourism Manager
Hinchinbrook Shire Council
Bendigo Visitor Centre (Victoria) shares local knowledge and passion to become a key driver in stimulating business activity in the region.

Located in a magnificent heritage building constructed at the height of the Victorian gold rush, the Bendigo Visitor Centre (VIC) began operating in 1996 as part of the Tourism Unit for the City of Greater Bendigo. Bendigo VIC’s role is to provide a central informed tourism shopfront for visitors and the community and to generate business for local tourism operators.

A major focus of Bendigo VIC’s marketing is to create economic growth by:

- Leveraging marketing campaigns undertaken by Council’s Marketing and Major Events and Bendigo Tourism Marketing with Bendigo VIC as the call to action
- Diversifying revenue streams into niche market segments
- Leveraging the conference sector with Bendigo VIC providing a central accommodation booking service.

With Bendigo located 90 minutes drive from Melbourne, the centre seeks to attract intrastate visitors and target local residents who have visiting friends and relatives.

Delivering the visitor services is a dynamic, dedicated core staff team with combined experience of over 30 years in the visitor servicing industry. The staff are supported by 60 volunteers, who as well as meeting information requests provide tour guiding and ambassador duties.

Testimonial

“The Bendigo Visitor Centre staff are a very professional team encouraging visitors to feel welcome, do more and stay longer in the City. The team continue to deliver beyond expectation and drive key business for our many tourism and business operators. They are innovative, willing to take risks and undertake new initiatives to ensure that Bendigo Visitor Centre continues to deliver excellence in customer service and business for the City.”

Kathryn Mackenzie
Executive Manager Tourism, City of Greater Bendigo
Generating economic growth

The VIC seeks to encourage longer stays and more spend in the region by enriching the visitor experience wherever possible. The centre delivers a diverse range of services including:

- Accommodation and business services
- Online reservation system via BookEasy
- Visitor information, tours, retail space and merchandise
- Living Arts Space
- A range of programs with the local community including 'welcome shops', an Ambassador Program and 'Meet the Maker' where visitors and residents can see local producers in action.

A strong web presence is critical to the VIC’s success in driving business activity, building brand value and pursuing new revenue opportunities.

To generate additional revenue for local businesses the VIC has created the Living Arts Space, where local artisans can display and sell their artworks, and local goods and crafts can be promoted and purchased. There is a strategic focus on high-quality, unique items, and an emphasis on the region’s arts and culture. This is reflected in the retail offerings and also local tours.

The VIC also proactively seeks out new revenue streams to offset operational and other expenses. Future commercial extensions under consideration include:

- Developing functionality to implement a comprehensive ticketing system
- Development of niche accommodation services
- Development of online distribution channels
- Development of an integrated Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system which would facilitate ongoing contact with visitors over the long term.

The VIC’s business plan sets the direction for achieving the centre’s goals for the next three years. By strategically planning ahead the centre is well placed to take advantage of business and commercial opportunities and to overcome any potential issues and obstacles.

Performance and measures of success

Bendigo VIC’s vision is ‘to be the leading Visitor Centre in regional Australia’. It is already a leader in delivering innovative visitor servicing programs. The centre won state tourism awards in 2009, 2010 and 2011 and the prestigious Australian Tourism Award in 2010 and again in 2011.

A key measure of economic contribution of the VIC is the revenue generated. The main revenue streams include commissions from accommodation, attractions, tour and ticketing services, retail sales, and exhibition donations.

Based on the VIC’s key objectives in their business plan, the following revenue projections were made for the 2010-2012 period (refer to Table 1). These targets have largely been met with the 2012 projections also on track and likely to be achieved over the coming months. According to the revenue targets outlined below, the Bendigo VIC achieved a 9 percent increase in accommodation and business service sales in 2011 compared with 2010. In addition, retail sales experienced a growth of 11 percent during the same period.

Customer feedback is another measure of success for the VIC. This is primarily received via a customer questionnaire using an online survey. Survey responses identify that an estimated 99 percent of respondents would recommend the services of the VIC to other visitors. Other forms of feedback and performance measures are generated through benchmarking reports and metrics through a touchpad feedback device located in the VIC.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revenue</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation and Business Services Sales</td>
<td>$1.7m</td>
<td>$1.85m</td>
<td>$2.0m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Sales</td>
<td>$180,000</td>
<td>$200,000</td>
<td>$220,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ingredients for success

Some important ingredients for VIC success include:

- Ensure a healthy and collaborative relationship with the Council, the Regional Tourism Organisation (RTO), regional operators and the tourism industry.
- Understand the distribution chain when implementing a retail and merchandise strategy. This knowledge underpins the development process of new marketing and branding campaigns.
- Seek a flexible approach to business delivery where there is scope to plan, think and operate like a commercial business, whilst being owned and administered by local government.
- Secure Council’s support for tourism through matched marketing funding to enable the VIC to effectively sell the city and region.
- Ensure planning and reporting structures are integrated with those of Council to support the centre’s efforts.
- Ensure the centre’s web-presence and use of other communication channels reflect the VIC’s strong service culture and value system.
- Maintain a strong, unified, creative and motivated volunteer team as a key component of successful service delivery.
- Communicate the value of tourism and the Bendigo VIC to the broader community and regional tourism industry as a priority and an ongoing task.
- Provide opportunities for people to connect at a one-on-one level through a personal approach in service delivery.
- Develop current and innovative business plans that capture the operational environment and the Council’s expectations.
- Assess the dynamics and nature of regional tourism and the implications for visitor numbers, length of stay and yield to the city.
- Keep abreast of technology advancements, which impact how visitors book holidays and increases competition for tourist dollars.

Testimonial

“The centre offers a holistic approach to visitor servicing by encouraging visitors to stay longer or finding a way to welcome them back in the future. This is directly helping my business thrive while meeting the needs of visitors at the same time. The booking service offers a conversion opportunity and makes operating my business easier; with a streamlined reservation system, coordinated event and group bookings with payments processed and deposited direct to my bank account. The Bendigo VIC team make it all very simple and easy for my business.”

Julie Baird
Barclay on View Motel Owner and Bendigo Tourism member
Lismore Visitor Information Centre’s (New South Wales) role in crisis management planning and response to help minimise impacts on the tourism industry and local community and assist in the region’s recovery.

Located in northern NSW on the highway between Sydney and Brisbane, Lismore is an important service and trading centre for the surrounding region. However, a challenge for Lismore is the occurrence of periodic yet severe flood events which have major economic impacts.

Tourism is a major economic driver for the Lismore and Nimbin area contributing approximately $107 million to the local economy. Recognising tourism’s vital role, Lismore City Council (Council) funds Lismore and Nimbin Tourism (LNT), the tourism body for the Lismore Local Government Area, and the Lismore and Nimbin Visitor Information Centres (VIC).

Lismore VIC opened in 1988 and is the administrative centre for LNT. Nimbin VIC opened in August 2007. Council’s Tourism Coordinator oversees operations at both the Lismore and Nimbin VICs and manages LNT and four full-time equivalent employees, four casuals across the organisations and one volunteer in Lismore.

The main visitor markets for Lismore VIC to target and service are those travelling from South East Queensland, Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR), holiday and leisure (grey nomads, families and backpackers) and business related travellers.

Lismore VIC offers visitors a “taste” of the Northern Rivers by providing a substantial range of local merchandise and produce for sale.

With frequent floods in recent years an important role for the VIC is in working closely with Council to minimise the negative impacts to the regional tourism industry and local community.

In 1999, the NSW Government funded a levee system to protect the central business district (CBD) and South Lismore from a 1-in-10-year flood event (this is a severity measure and not a timeframe). The new levee protects Lismore CBD from the most damaging flood waters and substantially increases the time available to evacuate residents and businesses.

The Lismore VIC is located inside the city’s flood levee. This provides the Centre with much-needed protection, enabling the VIC to remain open unless a very serious flood event occurs.

Testimonial

“We are only as good as our operators and our community! The success of the Lismore and Nimbin Visitor Information Centres has been built on a strong working relationship with the local tourism industry and boarded community. In partnership, we have developed a wide variety of projects and initiatives that has improved visitation and resulted in greater tourism products and experiences for visitors.”

Mitch Lowe
Tourism Co-ordinator, Lismore City Council
Crisis management planning and response

Council and LNT provide Lismore and Nimbin VICs with leadership and expertise in developing and implementing a crisis and risk management planning process. In turn, Lismore VIC works with the Council in coordinating tourism policy, plans and procedures to minimise impacts on the region’s tourism industry and economy.

In the event of a crisis the main role of the Lismore VIC, as directed by LNT, is to coordinate the recovery marketing, communication and messaging for the region.

Key strategic responses in crisis management and response initiated by the VIC include:

**Response Strategy 1:** Keep existing plans concise and to-the-point. Lismore VIC staff are given responsibility to understand and respond to four or five of Council’s key actions in times of a crisis.

**Response Strategy 2:** Put in place cancellation policies to be implemented in the case of a crisis. Given the region regularly hosts major sports and recreational events, Council in partnership with the VIC has developed an innovative cancellation policy to avoid legal disputes between accommodation providers and event organisers. For example, under the policy, accommodation providers are guaranteed a quota of room nights. The policy uses language around ‘postponement’ rather than ‘cancellation’ of events, as there is a strong commitment by organisers to re-schedule events.

**Response Strategy 3:** Develop a simple industry ‘Crisis Management Response Plan’ for local tourism operators to assist them in maintaining and retaining business and bookings following significant or extreme weather events. This includes a step-by-step process to educate managers on how to respond to visitor enquiries during and following the event. This plan also includes positive messages, communications and simple techniques to provide beneficial outcomes.

Performance and measures of success

LNT’s annual business plan describes and monitors the implementation of tourism procedures, objectives and strategies as outlined in Lismore City Council’s Strategic Plan (2008 – 2018).

The Lismore VIC performance against the business plan’s objectives and strategies is monitored quarterly. The results form the basis of the annual report, which is distributed to Councillors, Council Management and key tourism stakeholders.

Both Lismore and Nimbin VICs have visitor monitoring and count systems in place to track daily traffic flows. Combined, the VICs received over 128,000 visitors in the 2011/12 financial year. Total visitor numbers during the 2011/12 period were up 13 percent compared with the corresponding period the previous year (2010/11). Approximately one-third of visitors originated from the key market of South East Queensland.

The Lismore and Nimbin Tourism website is a portal for visitors to the region attracting over 600 unique visits per week. The website creates an identity for the region and showcases over 390 tourism operators. Google Analytics, an online tool which generates detailed statistics about the visitors to a website, is applied to monitor website engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity/hazard</th>
<th>Risk Severity</th>
<th>Likelihood</th>
<th>Performance indicators/control measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extreme weather: heavy rain, hail storms, drought, bushfires etc - damage to building; loss of operator revenue; negative perception etc.</td>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Implement disaster response strategy incl. clean-up and hotline if applicable Communication campaign to advise the area is “open for business” – focus on area’s resilience, preparedness for floods, plethora of raincoats and gumboots + emphasise the positive aspects of our area Liaise with operators to implement their cancellation policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health disasters or epidemics</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Unlikely</td>
<td>Comply with health warnings and advice from health authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community safety concerns e.g. tourist death/accident or high incidence of crime in area</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Unlikely</td>
<td>Work with police, community &amp; business groups to identify safety initiatives e.g. city security cameras &amp; regular security patrols etc; Instigate community awareness campaign</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ingredients for success

Lismore VIC has learnt considerable lessons and adopted a number of important strategies to cope with crises, usually in the form of extreme weather events such as flooding. Some important ingredients for VIC success in handling crises include:

- Establish a strong connection to the local tourism industry, with ongoing communication and liaison through regular tourism operator workshops. This has allowed the VIC Manager to remain across local issues and concerns, and act as an effective conduit to Council.

- Provide a conduit to local government in cases of crisis. Integrate the Strategic Tourism Plan with local government policy to be a force in local government planning and ensure crisis management planning takes into account the needs of the tourism industry including during disaster response and recovery.

- Ensure crisis and risk management strategies are well-coordinated; and that the VIC is aware of their role in any crisis event.

- Ensure that all staff are well trained and informed, particularly during a crisis. It is acknowledged that the workload of staff at the Lismore and Nimbin VIC more than trebles when crisis events occur. The processes need to reflect the mantra that staff and volunteers should be alert, ready to respond rapidly and calmly and know what is expected of them; this will not be intuitive so all staff need to have a set of process and procedures to follow.

- Deliver comprehensive skills development and training for all VIC staff and volunteers. This is particularly important during a crisis, but a requirement for all situations.

- Have in place procedures to ensure that communication is rapidly deployed, is sensitive and is an accurate reflection of the situation; this includes distribution of accurate images and messaging to all stakeholder groups to ensure that the crisis is not blown out of proportion.

- Be prepared to announce the region as ‘ready to trade’ in a positive way being mindful of businesses who may have suffered badly, in particular if there has been loss of life.

- Develop a shared understanding between Council staff and VIC staff as to the role of the VIC during a flood or other crisis event.

Testimonial

“The support we have received from the Lismore and Nimbin Visitor Information Centres has been invaluable; both in the form of direct visitor referrals to the Eltham Valley Pantry, and with ongoing assistance in further developing our business. The staff have at all times shown a high degree of professionalism in marketing and promoting our region, which in turn has resulted in increased awareness of our business.”

Julie Rhodes
Managing Director, Eltham Valley Pantry Pty Ltd
Insights into how the Swan Valley Visitor Centre (Western Australia), as an accredited visitor information experience, has positioned itself as the one-stop-shop for all visitors entering into the Swan Valley region.

The Swan Valley region hosts more than 2.1 million visitors a year, who spend an estimated $284 million. The region is a major contributor to tourism in Western Australia.

The Swan Valley Visitor Centre (VIC), which is accredited through the National Tourism Accreditation Program, is funded and operated by the City of Swan (Council). Council is committed to the centre’s success as a leading regional service provider and economic asset.

The equivalent of three full-time employees and 25 volunteers operate the VIC. Staff and volunteers are dedicated ambassadors who promote local businesses through referrals via front counter, email, website and telephone enquiries.

To achieve the highest levels of customer service, the VIC has a structured and rigorous staff and volunteer recruitment process. Staff and volunteers also participate fortnightly in Swan Valley Visitor Centre Familiarisation Program to ensure they have current knowledge of the region’s products and experiences.

The VIC plays a key role in growing the regional economy. Business growth, attraction and retention in the region are fostered by the VIC as part of its professional service delivery to its members and information provision to the region’s visitors.

The intrastate market, specifically the Perth metropolitan area is the primary target for the VIC, followed by interstate and international visitors.

In addition to its core activities, the VIC contributes to product development, interpretive infrastructure and regional marketing. Key economic initiatives undertaken by the VIC include linkages with the region’s event and festival organisers, development of the Swan Valley Platform Direct Database, implementation of the Better Business Blitz Research Program to member businesses and development and promotion of the Swan Valley Food and Wine Trail.

The VIC operates as a membership based organisation. It has a professional membership prospectus to attract and maintain members with fees based on business type and size.

Testimonial

“Our mission is to ensure each visitor enquiry not only meets but exceeds their individual needs. It makes me proud that the City of Swan, through the operation of the Swan Valley Visitor Centre, is providing one of Australia’s best integrated visitor servicing experiences.

The Centre operates as a welcoming shop front for the entire Swan Valley region and continues to prove itself as an industry leader through its dedication to tourism and using an integrated approach.”

Mark Bishop
Acting Chief Executive Officer
City of Swan
**Innovative business practices**

While it’s the core business function of the VIC to provide free visitor information services, it has developed several income streams and continues to seek out opportunities to generate revenue.

The Centre collaborates with event organisers and the tourism industry to promote the region’s key festivals and events to visitors and their target audiences. One of the past major festivals attracted more than 70,000 people and generated in excess of $3 million for the region. Swan Valley VIC is a key player promoting this event to make it a success.

To maximise service delivery for visitors, the VIC utilises the Swan Valley Platform Direct database. This purpose built software provides visitors with tailor-made solutions in the form of information sheets and reports on the many sought after tourism experiences in and around the Swan Valley. This system acts as a powerful integrated database of member service providers.

The success of the database in automating internal processes and improving product delivery means that the Swan Valley VIC is looking at rolling the software out to other VICS in Western Australia and nationally. The database will also be integrated into the back-end of the Centre’s website so members can update their business information directly to keep it current. The improved administrative outcome means VIC staff members have more time to focus on service provision.

The Swan Valley VIC website is the cornerstone of its information provision and is professionally designed and maintained.

Council is considering relocating the VIC to a purpose built, co-located facility in the heart of the Swan Valley. The new facility would allow the Centre to service more visitors and industry, which would provide additional economic benefits. In the past 12 months, the VIC assisted more than 59,000 visitors at the centre and handled over 250,000 visitor enquiries via the telephone, email or website.

To ensure the VIC continues to deliver innovative, quality services to visitors and the tourism industry the ‘Swan Valley Visitor Centre Business Plan 2011 to 2014’ was developed in collaboration with tourism industry stakeholders. The VIC is also part of the Council’s “Connected Communities” program.

**Performance and measures of success**

Swan Valley VIC has been recognised for its performance and valued contribution. The VIC has won three consecutive Western Australian Tourism Awards and in 2012 was inducted in to the Hall of Fame. In 2011 it also won the silver medal at the Qantas Australian Tourism Awards for Visitor Information and Services.

The VIC has a clear and well-documented process for reporting performance indicators to Council. The Centre tracks and reports its marketing and communication activities to assess its impacts. Below is an example of the Centre’s formal reporting framework.

The VIC’s contribution towards the economic success of both local businesses and the Swan Valley region can be further demonstrated by the following activities:

- **Better Business Blitz Research Program:** This is a research program where the data provides the local tourism industry and key stakeholders with valuable information on visitor preferences, key drivers and visitor behaviour. The research is a useful tool for new and existing tourism businesses to assist with business development, retention and the long-term sustainability of the industry.

- **Swan Valley Food and Wine Trail:** The award-winning Swan Valley Food and Wine Trail promoted by the Centre is a 32 kilometre scenic drive trail taking in more than 150 attractions including wineries, restaurants, breweries and accommodation. A Food and Wine Trail guide developed and distributed by the VIC assists visitors in navigating their way through the self-guided trail. The value-added element of the wine and food tourism industry fosters job creation, stimulates local businesses, particularly in regional areas and enhances wine exports and international tourism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Target market</th>
<th>Sub market</th>
<th>Success/outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New product development</td>
<td>Swan Valley Wedding Open Day – promoted on local radio, Facebook, Twitter and the website with 10,000 brochures</td>
<td>Perth Metropolitan Area and Intrastate</td>
<td>Weddings and Special Occasions</td>
<td>3,500 people attended the event. It generated around $4.2 million in wedding bookings for the region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced Branding</td>
<td>Swan Valley Food and Wine Trail Signage: The only tourism signage system of its kind in WA approved by Main Roads and TWA</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>A $40,000 investment that clearly defines the boundary, promotes attractions and encourages safe and easy navigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased Communication</td>
<td>Media Releases: More than 130 media stories were developed in 2010/11</td>
<td>Intrastate and Interstate</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Estimated total commercial value of this activity exceeded $145,000 in 2010/11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ingredients for success

Some important ingredients for VIC success include:

- Maintain strong networks in the region and State. The manager of the Swan Valley VIC is a member of the Visitor Centre Association of Western Australia (VCAWA) Board, the peak industry group representing visitor centres and the visitor servicing industry in WA. This membership allows the Centre to be well connected and across key industry trends.

- Establish a strong reporting regime to ensure all stakeholders are aware of the VIC’s performance. Swan Valley VIC has a clear and well-documented process for reporting performance indicators to Council. The Centre tracks and reports its marketing and communication activities to assess its impacts.

- Nurture and develop positive relationships with industry leaders, civic leaders and Council to assist with gaining business development and support. Partnerships have been essential to the success of the VIC and products such as the Swan Valley Food and Wine Trail.

- Provide ongoing training to staff and volunteers to develop the skills and knowledge of staff and volunteers necessary to deliver professional customer service.

- Demonstrate through constant networking and engagement that community benefits can be sustained and improved with a vibrant accredited visitor information centre.

- Communicate the successes to all stakeholders; this includes quantifying the Centre’s contribution to the regional economy.

- Embed processes to achieve long term viability as a not-for-profit visitor centre. All visitor information centres need to remain creative in sourcing resources and funding to remain sustainable into the future. Projects with outcomes such as the Better Business Blitz Research Program ensure the relevance of the VIC in the economic mix of the region.

- Continue to find ways to integrate technology into the delivery of first-class information provision.

- Maintain a professional and accurate website.
For more information

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