

CM13.3. Albury Visitor Services & Engagement Review

DATE	14 February 2023	FIL REFERENCE	FIL19/04420
CONFIDENTIAL	No		
FURTHER ENQUIRIES TO	Ambrose Glass Business & Lifestyle	PHONE	6023 8273
AUTHOR	Sue Harper		

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide details of the Albury Visitor Servicing and Engagement Review, as well as to recommend the preferred location for the Visitor Information Centre.

Background

Visitor servicing involves informing and educating visitors about local areas and tourism products and attractions. Contemporary visitor servicing utilises multiple platforms beyond a “Bricks and Mortar” Visitor Information Centre to engage visitors. Increasingly there is a need to focus on improved advocacy, repeat visitation, word-of-mouth referral, inspiration and not just information provision (both face-to-face and online and offline). It is estimated that Albury Visitor Information Centre serviced 1.8% of total visitation to Albury Wodonga during 2019 (pre COVID-19).

The Albury Visitor Information Centre (VIC) is located in the old Station Master’s house, in Albury’s Railway Precinct. The VIC opened in July 2010, when Council took a leadership role to provide advocacy for the tourism industry, provide comprehensive visitor servicing and a clear direction and pathway for the growth and development of the tourism industry.

During 2014, AlburyCity and the City of Wodonga entered into a Tourism Agreement to work together to plan, develop and grow tourism in Albury Wodonga. The Tourism Agreement was further strengthened by the Two Cities One Community Partnership Agreement in 2017 and was updated in 2020 and 2021 for a further three-year period.

The Councils share a single destination brand (Visit Albury Wodonga) acknowledging that visitors to our region do not see a separation between the two cities.

The current VIC has seen little innovation, this is partly due to constraints with the heritage listing of the building. Additionally, visitor servicing trends have been changing rapidly due to the growth of digital technology and media. It is recognised that the internet is now the number one tool for accessing inspiration and destination information for all demographics.

Key findings from the Albury Wodonga Destination Management Plan 2019-2023 (DMP) highlighted that:

- Most VICs will continue to experience a decline in walk-in visitors as digital information improves and is used more widely across demographic groups;
- The cost of delivering visitor services through VICs is increasing, while VICs, at the same time, are experiencing a decrease in utilisation by visitors; and
- Most VICs struggle to have consolidated and up-to-date tourism product databases of all products available in their respective regions.

To support the objectives outlined within the Albury Wodonga DMP of increasing visitor numbers, length of stay and visitor spend, the DMP identified the need to undertake a review of current visitor services to ensure that Albury Wodonga is achieving the best Return on Investment (ROI). Additionally, Albury Wodonga needs to remain competitive and align destination marketing and visitor servicing and engagement with emerging trends.

The Visit Albury Wodonga team worked with Murray Regional Tourism (MRT) on the Murray Visitor Servicing Transformation Project (MVSTP) and continues to review and implement findings relevant to Albury Wodonga. Conducted in 2019, the MVSTP was established to explore the opportunity to fundamentally change and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of visitor servicing operations across the Murray Region. The primary objectives of this Program are to:

- Increase visitor spend in region.
- Create a visitor servicing model that is customer focussed and not built on historical approaches.
- Leverage existing investments in visitor servicing operations to provide greater effect.
- Improve advocacy levels to drive repeat patronage and word-of-mouth referral.
- Be a connector with the community.
- Reduce duplication of resources and collateral across the wider region.

Following the MVSTP, the Councils (AlburyCity and the City of Wodonga) engaged consultants Sandwalk Partners to conduct the Albury Wodonga Visitor Service and Engagement Review (AWVS&ER). The Review explored opportunities to deliver targeted and effective visitor servicing both face-to-face and through online channels. The final review report provided a range of recommendations which are detailed below and have guided progression of the considerations and proposed next steps.

Issues

Albury Wodonga Visitor Services & Engagement Review

The Albury Wodonga Visitor Services and Engagement Review (Review) was conducted in 2019 and finalised in early 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resourcing issues, implementation of the review has been delayed.

The Review looked to identify the most appropriate model(s) to deliver efficient, targeted and effective visitor servicing and engagement, given the changing needs and expectations of visitors. The project reviewed and analysed future trends to ensure Albury Wodonga is achieving the best return on investment for visitor servicing and engagement, ensuring visitors are the primary focus to:

- Determine how the Visit Albury Wodonga team services tourism industry stakeholders and identifies potential improvements to the Tourism Partner Program,
- Identify skills and resources gaps; and
- Analyse existing Albury Wodonga visitor servicing channels (online and offline) in relation to the customer journey and industry best practice, including analysis of visitors to Albury Wodonga and their needs. Consideration was given to:
 - How we deliver visitor servicing and engagement today and into the future.
 - How Albury Wodonga is servicing 98.2% of visitors (pre-COVID-19) who are visiting each year but not utilising the Albury VIC.
 - The sustainability of the VIC.
 - Output - visitor servicing strategy with actionable recommendations to enhance visitor servicing and engagement in Albury Wodonga across all channels.
- Explore alternate visitor servicing models to deliver more efficient, targeted and effective visitor servicing in Albury Wodonga (across all channels). For consideration:
 - Explore alternative models for providing visitor services and engagement which may potentially consider moving away (over a staged approach) from the provision of traditional “bricks and mortar” visitor services.
 - Opportunities for the VIC to generate revenue, potential enhancements (if any) to the existing Visit Albury Wodonga’s website to provide a seamless and easy-to-navigate user experience from inspiration to booking.
 - Opportunities to integrate accommodation and tour booking functionality on the website.
 - Opportunities to use technology to examine how visitors are entering and moving around the region; and
 - Output - provide a cost-benefit analysis of the recommended visitor servicing model.
- Development of an implementation plan to support the recommended visitor servicing model (including skills and resource gap analysis). This activity has been completed.

The Review made 23 recommendations segmented into 10 focus areas that set out what is needed to deliver a multi-channel model. Several of the 10 recommendations have been actioned.

4.3. Recommendation 2 - Establish a “Flagship” (Gateway) VIC at the heart of the network as a showcase of the best of Albury, Wodonga and the Murray Region.

The primary physical asset in the recommended multi-channel network, is a flagship Visitor Information Centre, for the region, to showcase the best of Albury Wodonga and the Murray Region.

Benchmarking and research determined that to be a successful flagship VIC, it should have the following characteristics:

- Positioned in a high visibility, high traffic location and fully optimised to become a place of discovery, a trusted source of information, an attraction in its own right;
 - it should capitalise on adjacent or associated attractions, to be a destination for visitors;
 - connected to other nearby attractions with day/night-time footfall;
 - it should form part of an integrated precinct, with access to food and beverage and retail, programmable/hireable spaces, onsite activations, entertainment and events;
- Natural location for local community activity, visitors staying centrally, transport links - key will be integration of the VIC and precinct into a “must-see, must-do” attraction;

- Must become the natural information “go to” point for locals, and both a launch pad and end point, for a visit to the city;
 - local hub, to discover, engage, transact and advocate;
 - “Must do” and “trusted” first stop on the journey - an introduction to the city, what’s on, the essential Albury Wodonga experience, where to go next, when and why;
 - also, a convenient final stop on the journey, where visitors can make a final purchase to take with them or have shipped home

This recommendation proposed three potential locations for a Flagship VIC, including QEII Square, Noreuil Park Foreshore and Albury Botanic Gardens. They are based on known variables of:

- Existing visitation;
- Established co-located or nearby attractions;
- Preferences expressed during stakeholder consultations and research; and
- Observations.

This recommendation led to including provision for a VIC space alongside the Box Office in the Preliminary Design of the redevelopment of the AEC Convention Wing, which is currently due for completion in 2026. Detailed design of the AEC redevelopment is soon to commence and provision of a VIC space can be further considered during this next phase of the project. Inclusion of a VIC at the AEC could support operations of the Box Office during weekends, information provision to conferences and meetings being hosted at the AEC and event activation in QEII Square.

Rather than further delay enhancements to VIC services, there is an opportunity to progress immediate implementation of the Sandwalk review recommendations within QEII Square/the Cultural Precinct. The re-location of this existing service will allow us to understand the benefits or impacts of the changes prior to progression of the AEC redevelopment and/or to inform whether the proposed location will in fact meet short-, medium- and long-term demand.

Albury Visitor Information Centre (VIC)

Council’s existing lease of the Station Master’s House in the Railway precinct expires on 30 September 2023. The current outgoings for the premises total approximately \$70,000 (ex gst) per annum. Should a new lease be negotiated, a market valuation of the Station Master’s house would be sought to determine the annual rental cost and recent inflationary pressures would need to be considered. Council has leased the building since 2010 and has renewed the Agreement on multiple occasions (2014, 2017, 2020). Given the upcoming expiry of the lease, it is timely to activate implementation of the recommendations of the Albury Wodonga Visitor Services and Engagement Review.

The VIC has experienced an increase in security and safety risks associated with the location of the building. This has included various campers in the surrounding gardens, a fire lit in the fire exit of the VIC building and several in the surrounding gardens and veranda of the building during the colder months.

On many occasions employees have been faced with intoxicated and disrespectful people entering the building, loitering in the immediate grounds and/or behaving in an inappropriate manner. To

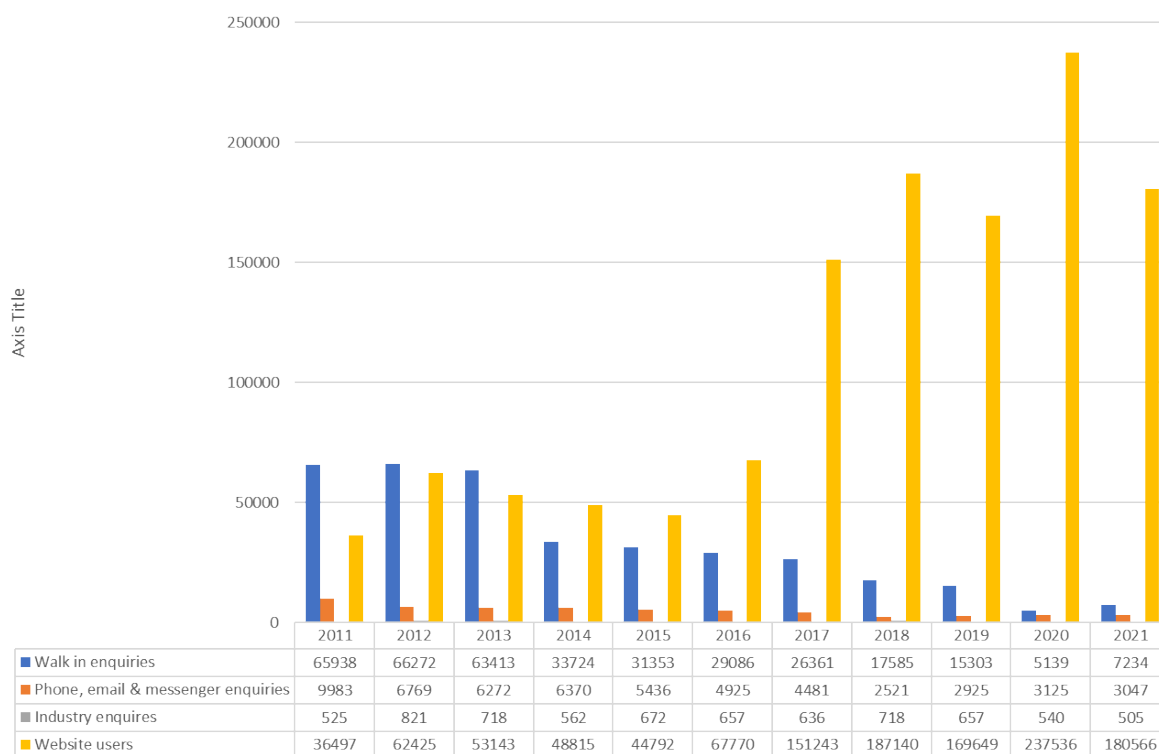
support the safety, health and well-being of our employees we have increased security and now ensure our people do not work alone.

The below table outlines the positive and negative impacts of the current Albury VIC.

Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts
Proximity to the freeway	Ongoing lease and outgoing cost increases
Proximity to coach and rail links	Employee safety due to security risks in and around surrounding grounds and resulting increases in resourcing costs
Access to dump point	Limitations to update building due to heritage listing
Access to potable water	Technology speed issues
Accessible storage	Proximity to CBD
Established VIC	Decline in visitor numbers to the Centre
Existing signage	Ongoing rodent issues
Long vehicle parking	Ongoing maintenance costs
	Isolated business

An analysis of VIC enquiries over the past 11 years highlights a declining trend across face-to-face, walk-in, phone, email and industry enquiries. It is also evident there is an upward trend in website enquiries and social media engagement. These trends are shown in the below graphs.

Albury Visitor Information Centre Enquiries 2011 – 2021.



Visit Albury Wodonga Social Media Engagement 2012 – 2021



Accredited Visitor Information Centres (AVIC)

Australia has 453 accredited Visitor Information Centres (VICs), of these there are 107 accredited VICs in NSW. With the growing number of information touch points for travellers, the role of VICs and visitor information servicing must continue to evolve and adapt. The accredited VIC network comprises only those VICs whose primary purpose is visitor information servicing and who are genuine providers of timely, accurate and impartial visitor information. These services are distinguished by the italicised yellow on blue 'i' symbol.

An overview of criteria for accreditation is outlined below. It should also be noted there is an extensive assessment checklist of additional requirements which include, operational protocols and procedures, industry engagement, signage, premises provisions and vehicular parking, to mention a few. These have been discussed and considered with the relevant teams that may be impacted.

Functions	Criteria
Opening Hours	Open 360 days per year for a minimum of 42 hours per week, with four hours on Saturdays and four on Sundays.
Primary Function	The primary function of an AVIC is disseminating visitor information, marketing the area of its responsibility, and satisfying visitor requests e.g., accommodation and tour bookings etc.
Scope of Information Provision	Local, Regional and State-wide information provision.

Staffing	A minimum of one full-time permanent staff member with at least one year's experience as a Tourism Officer or AVIC Manager, a minimum of one year's relevant management experience, or a relevant tourism management or general management qualification or tourism-related degree. Ongoing training and professional development for staff.
Management and Planning	Operates in accordance with a Business Plan and Operations Manual.
Application Requirements	Application direct to Destination NSW. Requires the submission of a Business/Marketing Plan relevant to AVIC component of the business.
Annual Accreditation Fees	\$880.00 incl GST

Alternate VIC Options

Any new location for a VIC will require some realignment of the directional "i" signage in the CBD.

Consideration is provided below on the Sandwalk review recommended locations for a VIC:

QEII Square Precinct

Existing Attraction for Visitors and Locals

- Situated on the major pedestrian thoroughfare of Dean Street, QEII Square is a high visitation location showcasing a number of the key cultural and lifestyle aspects of Albury Wodonga. It is a natural and authentic link to the "heart of the city".
- Incorporates several existing visitor attractions including Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA), the Albury Entertainment Centre, Albury LibraryMuseum and Retro Café, all surrounding popular open space currently used for festivals, markets and other activations.
- QEII square provides access to existing audiences, a central location, authentic cultural and community content and potential to disperse information to locals (as a conduit to the Visiting Friends and Relatives market) and tourists drawn by its established status as an attraction.

Albury's LibraryMuseum is an existing tourism destination with state-of-the-art technology, a diverse exhibition schedule and a dynamic program of events. The current 7-day operations of the LibraryMuseum are consistent with the accreditation requirements of a VIC. The LibraryMuseum team recognise the potential synergies of co-locating the VIC in the entrance of the venue and is keen to progress a trial during the interim period.

The potential re-location of the VIC to the LibraryMuseum will incur a one-off relocation and fit-out cost that is estimated to be between \$50-\$100k. There are provisions within the 2022- 2026 Four Year Delivery Program Budget allocated to this project.

Positive Impacts of LibraryMuseum	Negative Impacts of LibraryMuseum
Proximity to CBD - cafes, retail	No existing long-vehicle parking available
Co-location within an existing business	Limited proximity access for short-term parking
Increase in foot traffic	Operational storage of collateral needs to be determined
Access to cultural precinct and other visitor experiences	Cost to fit out

Safety and security of staff	Alignment of opening hours of the Library Museum and with VIC Accreditation,
Access to timely technology	
Cross training of staff and other operational synergies (e.g. consumables)	
Reduction in rental and maintenance costs	
No lease agreement required	
Better utilisation of existing human resources	

Noreuil Park Foreshore – Riverside Precinct

- Existing Attraction for visitors and locals.
- Existing high visitation location showcasing one of the key (and often quoted) aspects of the Albury Wodonga lifestyle.
- The most popular riverside park in Albury, located less than a kilometre from the Albury CBD.
- Trees, expansive grassed areas, picnic tables and fenced children's playground it is a natural attractor of locals and visitors as a place to relax.
- Access to the river for swimming and low-impact water sports, as well as walking and bike trails, make it an obvious gathering point.
- Existing infrastructure such as the River Deck restaurant, barbecues and ample parking spaces.

There is no building currently identified that would be suitable for use as a VIC. The Mitta Mitta Rowing Club next to the River Deck Café was highlighted during consultations as a potential site for a new VIC. There is an existing Council Licence Agreement in place with the Rowing Club until 2025.

Positive Impacts to Riverside Precinct	Negative Impacts of Riverside Precinct
Potential opportunity for longer-term vision that aligns with the MRE Masterplan	On-going safety and security issues associated with operating at an isolated location.
Proximity within Riverside Precinct and to the river	Does not suit short-term solution. Would require a build and fit out of a shipping container or extensive update to the Turks Head building estimated to exceed \$100k and subject to Council planning approval process
	Limited visitation to Noreuil Park/Riverside Precinct during winter months
	Limited access to CBD
	Limited access to cafes and retail to extend stay

Albury Botanic Gardens

- Existing Attraction for Visitors and Locals
- Situated at the end of the major thoroughfare of Dean Street.
- High existing visitation of over 200K annual visitors.
- A natural and much loved by locals and highly rated by visitors.
- Ranked highly as a potential VIC location (prompted) in consumer research.
- Incorporates gardens, open spaces, picnic areas, children's garden and several curated walks.
- Albury Botanic Gardens provides access to an existing audience, a central location, authentic community content and potential to disperse information to locals (as a conduit to the VFR market) and tourists drawn by its established status as an attraction.

Sensitivity to the Gardens' core purpose, ambience and natural attributes would be key in establishing a built structure to house the VIC unless existing buildings could be repurposed. The recently adopted Botanic Gardens Masterplan does not include provisions for a VIC or other new building in the short term.

Positive Impacts of Botanic Gardens	Negative Impacts of Botanic Gardens
Potential opportunity for longer-term activation that aligns with the Botanic Gardens Masterplan	Potential removal of lawns and/or nationally significant gardens for an interim facility
Key Visitor Experience	Does not suit short-term solution
Proximity to public amenities	Extensive Council Funding needed to design and build (>\$150k)
	Limited access for parking due to the medical centre in the vicinity of the Botanic Gardens
	No long vehicle parking
	Limited access to cafes and retail to extend stay
	Significant risk to corporate reputation

From both a safety and financial perspective the recommended alternate location for the VIC is to co-locate within the LibraryMuseum.

Risk

- **Business Risk** – There would be no financial risk to AlburyCity in co-locating the VIC within the LibraryMuseum. Rather this will deliver annual savings, due to minimal rental requirements and reduced outgoings, as well as a reduced footprint. Operational hours of the VIC and Library Museum may need reviewing to ensure accreditation is maintained. The current level of human resourcing would not change.
- **Corporate Risk** – If AlburyCity does not improve visitor engagement and service delivery, the visitor economy may suffer through decreased visitation numbers or visitor dissatisfaction. Community engagement will be required to ensure a seamless transition if the recommendation is endorsed.

- **WHS and Public Risk** – Relocation to the LibraryMuseum addresses the safety and security risks associated with the existing VIC location for both employees and customers.
- **Environmental Risk** – None identified with relocating to the LibraryMuseum
- **Delivery Program Risk** – The relocation of the VIC to the LibraryMuseum will deliver annual savings of \$50-70K per annum. Provision for implementation of the Visitor Servicing Review recommendations is included in the adopted 2022-2026 4YDP, accordingly the relocation presents no delivery program risk.

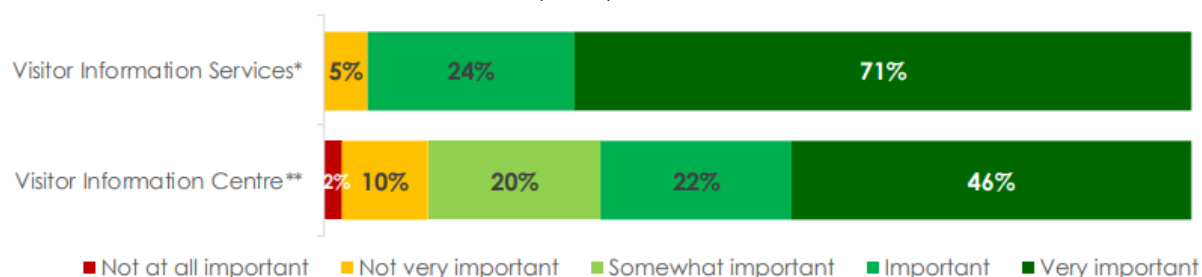
Community Engagement

During 2019, AlburyCity and the City of Wodonga engaged Sandwalk Partners to review Visitor Services and Engagement in Albury Wodonga and explore opportunities to support the growth of a sustainable visitor economy in the region. The project's primary aim was to develop a plan for Visitor Services and Engagement, with recommendations to enhance the visitor experience.

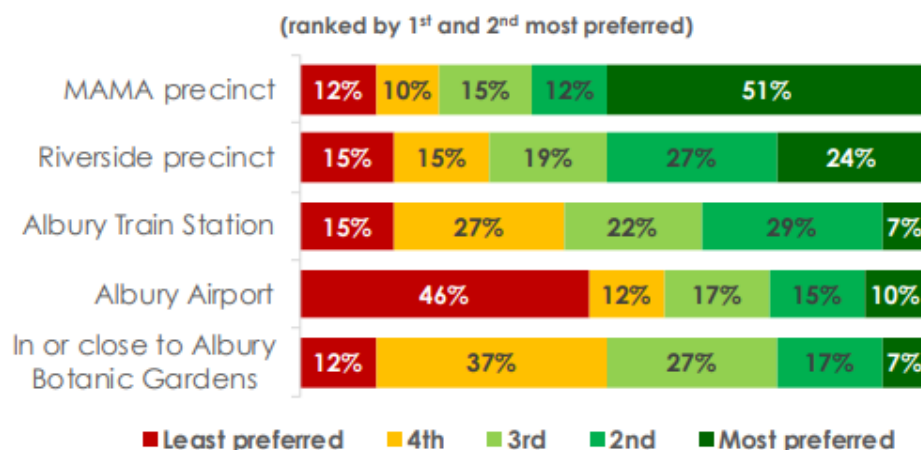
To support recommendations of the Review and to complement and sense-check the findings from the industry stakeholder consultation sessions, Sandwalk Partners conducted a "have your say" survey via an online questionnaire distributed via the Visit Albury Wodonga Tourism Partner database of 134 partners, plus Albury Business Connect (formerly Albury Northside Chamber of Commerce) database.

The desire for Council to supply Visitor Information Services among local businesses was universal. A dedicated Visitor Information Centre in its current form is seen as being important by many, however, almost a third don't see it as being critical, primarily due to the perceived switch to digital information sources.

The scale below shows how our industry stakeholders view the importance of Visitor Information Services and a dedicated Information Centre (N=41).

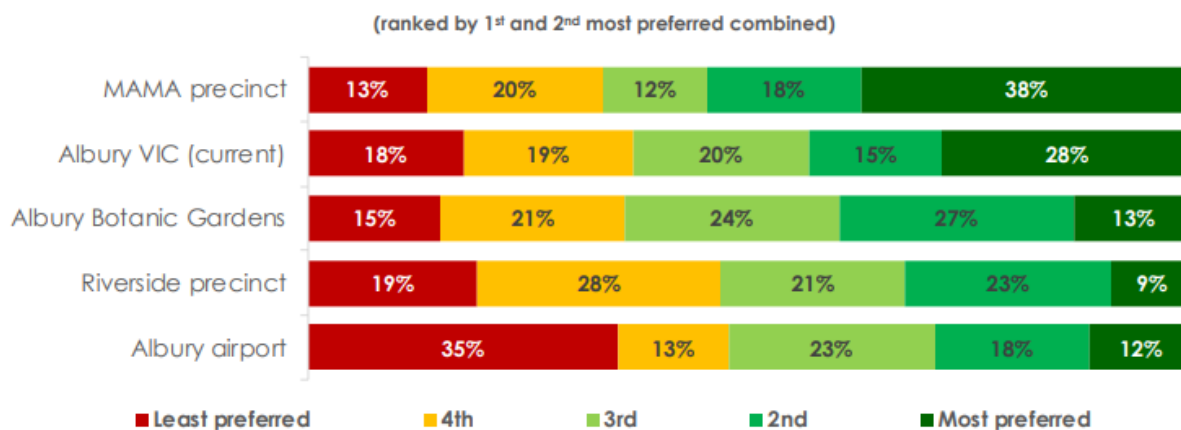


Additionally, Industry cited Murray Arts Museum Albury Precinct (Cultural Precinct) as the preferred location for Visitor Information Services.



In addition to Industry feedback, Sandwalk Partners conducted a community “have your say” survey to gauge local sentiment about living in Albury Wodonga, how our community sources information and preferred locations for provision of visitor information services. The Survey was distributed via both Council’s websites, the “AlburyCity News” eDM and promoted through local radio.

A low response rate (14 responses) lead to a research company (Silver Lining Strategy) being engaged to undertake further research with local Albury Wodonga residents. A total of 120 responses were collected. As was the case with industry research, the Cultural Precinct was the preferred location for Visitor Information Services and Engagement for residents, as illustrated in the scale below.



Options

1. That Council endorses the Albury VIC moving from its current location at the Station Master’s House in the Railway precinct to the Albury LibraryMuseum by 30 September 2023. **Recommended.**

If supported, the lessor will be advised that Council will not renew its Lease Agreement for a further term and will vacate the Station Master’s house by 30 September 2023. In addition, the Visitor Economy and Experience team will inform Tourism Partners and Industry Stakeholders of the pending move of the VIC to the new location.

2. Seek further information to this report. **Not recommended.**
3. Make no changes to the current VIC location and enter into another Agreement with the lessor. **Not Recommended.**

Conclusion

Albury Wodonga's tourism industry plays a significant role in the development of our region's social, cultural and economic success. The tourism marketplace is increasingly competitive as regional destinations endeavour to regain and build market share as the Australian visitor economy emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic and recent flooding impact across Eastern Australia.

Visitor servicing involves informing and educating visitors about local areas and tourism products and attractions. Advances in technology have resulted in a significant increase in providing visitor information and services digitally and a corresponding reduction in physical visitations to Visitor Information Centres.

The Albury Wodonga Visitor Services and Engagement Review (Review) was conducted by Sandwalk Partners in 2019 and finalised in early 2020. It provided a range of recommendations to ensure that our services are responsive to changes in visitor behaviour and the way they source information. A key recommendation of the review was the relocation of the Visitor Information Centre to an alternative location that would maximise the visitor experience. Three potential locations were identified, including QE11 Square/the Cultural Precinct.

The potential location of the service in QE11 Square/the Cultural Precinct led to provision for a Visitor Information Centre (VIC) space being included alongside the Box Office in the Preliminary Design of the redevelopment of the AEC Convention Wing. Detailed design of the AEC redevelopment is soon to commence and provision of a VIC space can be further considered during this next phase of the project. Completion of the redevelopment is anticipated in 2026.

There have been a number of safety and security issues associated with the existing Albury Visitor Information Centre location. The current lease expires in September 2023. Rather than further delay enhancements to VIC services, there is an opportunity to progress immediate implementation of the Visitor Services and Engagement Review recommendations by relocating the VIC to the Library Museum within the Cultural Precinct. Officers have conducted an analysis of the three potential locations identified in the Review recommendations and determined this to be the most suitable location at the present time.

The relocation of this existing service will allow us to understand the benefits or impacts of its positioning within the Library Museum and Cultural Precinct and inform future considerations regarding its potential incorporation into the AEC redevelopment.

Recommendation

That Council endorses the Albury Visitor Information Centre moving from its current location at the Station Master's House in the Railway precinct to the Albury Library Museum by 30 September 2023.