

Beach Hut Booking Process – Proposals for changes to be made to the booking system

Current Position

For a number of years the Town Council has operated a 'lottery' system for the allocation of beach huts for the coming season. Generally, a beach hut booking form is posted to all customer who have booked before or have otherwise expressed an interest. For the 2018 season this included an online booking form. Booking forms have been sent during October/November in recent years. Customers are given until early January to send in their booking requests. In January the staff at Swanage Information Centre allocate bookings starting with longer requests. Where two or more customers want the same period, staff use a lottery system. This is essentially a random selection or 'lucky dip' whereby staff physically mix up booking requests and take the one on the top of the pile. This is seen to be a fair way to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to receive their desired beach hut.

2018 Season

For the 2018 season the Visitor Services Team undertook a number of new approaches to marketing beach huts as follows:

- **Beach Hut Competition**
During the summer we ran a competition to win a free beach hut for 2018 Carnival. This resulted in the collection of some 850 email addresses and we sent an online booking form to all these potential customers.

- **Online booking form**
We developed an online booking form, which gave us the ability to use the email and Facebook promotion tools available.

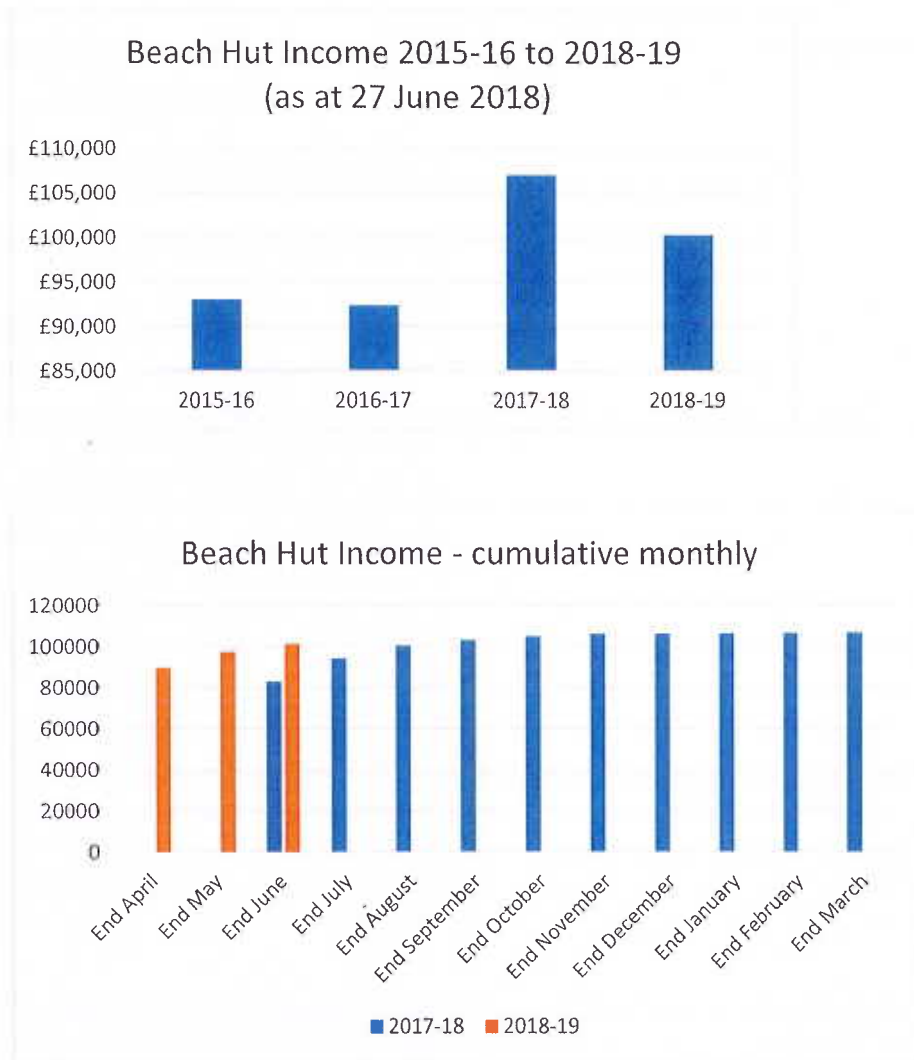
- **Facebook posts**
We ran a whole series of beach hut promotions during the 'lottery' phase on Facebook with direct links to the online booking form.

- **Facebook boosting**
We paid a small amount of money to 'boost' Facebook posts for both the competition and beach hut booking form. Each time we 'boosted' (effectively whereby Facebook place your advert on other peoples pages), we saw an increase in applications.

- **New online booking system**
During 2018 a new beach hut booking system, developed by a company called Avalon, has enabled online booking and payments for customers. This is now working very well.

This new marketing approach produced an increase in applications for beach huts. Unfortunately we do not currently have figures for applications received in 2017 or 2018 (we will be recording this in the future). The figures below show financial performance for the last 4 years, note that 2018-19's income is as at 27 June 2018. It should also be noted that a price increase was included in 2018-19, equivalent to roughly 3%. The increase in 2017-18 was partly due to the introduction of Spa Retreats.

The second chart shows that income received up to June 2018 is approx. £18,000 more than the same period in the previous year (23% increase).



These figures clearly demonstrate that the number of customers booking beach huts far exceeds what has taken place in previous years.

Issues with current booking system

- Very complex for customers to understand
- Lottery raises customer expectations and leads to large number of unhappy customers
- Lottery seen as opaque and not transparent
- Very large level of administration for staff
- Large amount of cancellations after bookings as customers place multiple bookings or work with friends and family
- Customers are often not happy with what they are offered (usually because they restrict their preferences to individual and very popular huts)

Considering the amount of customer issues we have received this year, and the number of bookings made, the 'lottery' approach currently being used to book beach huts is no longer viable and needs to be amended.

Proposals

Basic assumptions of a new booking approach:

- That we need to retain the 'long-lets' as these bring in a large amount of income, particularly for quieter periods.
- That we need to reduce the number of cancellations as these cause a huge administrative burden and are a significant customer service issue.
- We need an approach which customers understand.
- Customers wish to book their visitor accommodation based on their beach hut booking so need to know quickly if they are successful.

The various options considered here are as follows:

Option 1 – Split into different periods.

Option 2 – Split into different periods but maintain a lottery for Carnival.

Option 1 - Split into different periods

The following approximate timetable is proposed:

- **Phase 1:** 1st November – Take applications for 26-52 weeks only on a 'first come, first served' basis. Customers could immediately book online or ring up. A non-refundable deposit or full payment is taken at time of booking.
- **Phase 2:** 14th November - Take applications for 7-25 weeks only on a 'first come, first served' basis. Customers could immediately book online or ring up. A non-refundable deposit or full payment is taken at time of booking.
- **Phase 3:** 28th November - Take applications for 1-6 weeks only on a 'first come, first served' basis. Customers could immediately book online or ring up. A non-refundable deposit or full payment is taken at time of booking.

This option does not include a lottery for any beach huts and would effectively be the same as booking a hotel room. Customers would either ring up or book online from the opening date. It is envisaged that this would be a very busy few days for the staff at each date above, however it would be over very quickly and customers would understand the booking approach. Any paper applications received by that date would be entered into the system at the same time, although we would look to discourage this form of booking as we would be required to contact the individual to take a deposit (otherwise we could see later cancellations).

Option 2 – Split into different periods but maintain lottery for Carnival

As Option 2, but add the following Phase and adjust the above dates accordingly:

- Phase 2.1: Undertake lottery for Carnival Week only

This would still be a significant administrative burden for staff, although customers would probably recognise the reasons for the lottery and understand why they may not be successful. This would also add quite some complexity to the IT booking system (and cost) to set this up and work effectively.

Taking this forward

It is recognised that members would like to consider any new approach to beach hut bookings in some detail and the Visitor Services Team would be keen to talk through a range of options. While it is felt that Option 1 is the most efficient and effective process, it is acknowledged that there are a number of ways of implementing a new approach which could help mitigate the impact on those customers who appreciate the lottery system.

It is proposed that for any decision made all customers are written to so that they are aware of the changes.

Recommendation:

That a working party is formed to consider the above approach in detail.

Mr Culvin Milmer
Visitor Services Manager and Business Development Officer

June 2018

Events – Requests for use of Town Council property in relation to forthcoming events

Event Management Stage 1 - 2018

The Town Council is asked to provide provisional approval for the use of Council property for the following new events on the stated dates. This will allow event organisers to start to plan events. Once provisional approval has been provided by the Council, event organisers will be asked to submit an Event Plan, Risk Assessment, and adequate insurance, at least six weeks in advance of the event. This work is delegated to officers.

New Event requests

No.	Event	Date	Organiser	Venue	Detail	Recommendation
1.	Triathlon	11 th August 2019	Results Triathlon (Michelle Holloway nee. Noble)	Sandpit Field and Main Beach	Triathlon will be the same format as in 2018. The VSM is keen to fix the date for the triathlon as there has been some confusion between two triathlon companies over dates, and it is felt prudent to resolve dates for 2019 at this earlier opportunity.	Recommend provisional approval
2.	Triathlon Festival	29 th – 30 th June 2019	Challenging Events (Kelly Wickens taken over from Spencer Waking)	Sandpit Field and Main Beach	Long swim, aquathlon and triathlon – the same format as in 2018. The VSM is keen to fix the date for the triathlon as there has been some confusion between two triathlon companies over dates, and it is felt prudent to resolve dates for 2019 at this earlier opportunity.	Recommend provisional approval