Tourist information services in Iceland
Where are we now and where do we want to go?

Hrafnhildur Ýr Víglundsdóttir, project manager of regional development
hrafnhildur@ferdamalastofa.is

Where are we now?

The Icelandic Tourist Board (ITB) provides financial support to several tourist information centres around the island. Its support usually covers between 20 – 40% of each office's annual cost. An exception is the visitor centres of national parks that are funded fully by the state. ITB does not own the tourist offices nor provide housing. The support is via service contracts that include conditions such as opening hours and the obligation of giving out neutral information.

On the map below, you can see the tourist information system as it is operating now. Below the map, the business models are discussed.
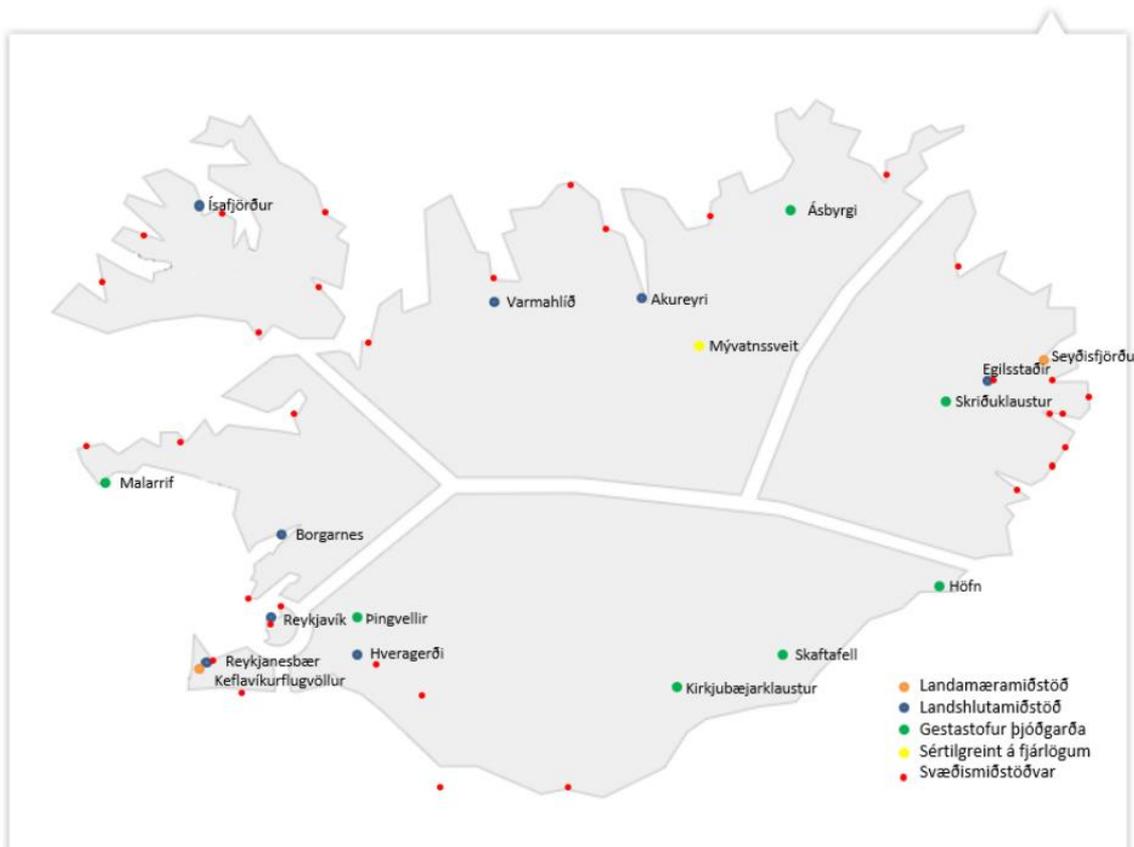
Picture 1 – Tourist information centres now

Orange - Specified information centres on borders
The present border centres are situated in Keflavík airport (international flights) and in Seyðisfjörður harbour where the Smyril line ferry docks. Keflavík airport does not run a

traditional information centre with brochures and such but has marked staff that provides information to guests, mostly on issues related to the airport itself such as car rentals, buses and such. The airport authority, Isavia, mostly funds the information service with minimal assistance from ITB.

In Seyðisfjörður harbour (Smyril line ferry), the tourist information centre is operated by the municipality (75%) and supported by ITB with moderate funding (appr. 25%).

<u>Blue – Regional Centres</u>
The regional centres are in most cases operated and funded by municipalities (50-95% each). ITB offers financial support in the form of cooperation contracts where the centres have to fulfil certain obligations. The contracts have not been revised as such for the last 5 years and the amounts have not changed for around 10 years, in spite the drastic increase in tourism numbers. The regional centres are supposed to be responsible for communication and cooperation with smaller local centres in their area, but lack of funding and time has made that obligation hard to fulfil.

<u>Green – Visitor Centres of National Parks</u>
The visitor centres are operated almost solely by the state. Their only obligation is to educate guests about the national park/protected area in question but with the increase of visitors and a general demand for more information, they have expanded their services to general tourist information provision as well.

<u>Yellow – (Same as blue)</u>

<u>Red – Local Centres</u>
Municipalities almost solely operate and fund local centres, which are often a part of some other entity such as a campsite, a swimming pool, a museum or such. There is little or no communication or coordination between local centres.

Main challenges with the current tourist information system

- ✓ No specific official logo/benchmark that separates official tourist offices from private offices. Therefore, tourist have no basis to evaluate if the information they are getting is neutral and professional.

- ✓ Little or no coordination and/or cooperation in information provision between regions and within regions.

- ✓ Little or no coordination in quality control and training of staff of tourist offices.

- ✓ High turnover rate

- ✓ Weak legislation with only registration as a requirement and not enough staff at ITB to follow up on if conditions about neutral information provision are met (and if all those presenting themselves as tourist offices are registered)

- ✓ Insufficient funding

Designing a new system

To meet the challenges mentioned above started a project at the end of 2015 with the aim of creating a new coordinated system for tourist information provision. From the very start, ITB has emphasised building a solid base/foundation in cooperation with various stakeholders. The development phase is from 2016-2018 and a new system will be launched in 2019.

To build a strong base ITB developed close cooperation with regional marketing offices (functioning partly as DMO's) and Safetravel (www.safetravel.is) on identifying and implementing priority support projects in four different categories; *Safety issues*; *Quality, skills and environmental issues*; *Digital challenges and possibilities*; and *Logo and design*. This cooperation was formalised through special funding agreements.

The team and project outline
ITB oversees the project and is responsible for its coordination. In addition, the project team includes one project manager from each regional office (7 in total) and one from Safetravel. The project managers work in four teams according to the project categories previously mentioned.

Year 1 (2016) – Starting the dialogue – identifying priorities
The first year was used to engage with stakeholders, start the dialogue by introducing the work ahead. The project group also identified several priority projects within each category to execute in 2017 (see below).

Safety issues
Objective: That tourist information regarding safe travel is available to guests all around Iceland and through the internet all year round. Steps toward the objective:

- ✓ Developing a template to categorise security points (places where security information can be passed on to guests in any form) and defining which information is provided in each category.
- ✓ Working with tourism companies designing a model on how to provide security information to their customers.
- ✓ Preparing mobile safety information centres in case of natural hazards.
- ✓ Other information gathering and analysis.

Quality, skills and environmental issues
Objective: To increase the visitor experience through standardized quality service, training of staff and visible environmental protection. To make jobs in tourist information services feasible as long term positions. Steps towards the objective:

- ✓ Skills analysis for different types of information services.
- ✓ Education policy for tourist information staff (based on above analysis).
- ✓ Quality handbook for public tourist information services.

Digital challenges and possibilities

Objective: To analyse visitor needs regarding digital tourist information. To analyse the need for a mutual backend for public tourist information staff. To explore digital options in areas with poor internet connectivity.

- ✓ Towards guests: What information do they need and in what form?
- ✓ Towards internal work: What functions should a digital backend have? What information should be there and who should have access to it?

Logo and design

Objective: To distinguish public tourist information from other by mutual marking and branding. Done in cooperation with Promote Iceland.

- ✓ Choosing and/or designing a logo for official tourist information centres.
- ✓ Creating a user manual and rules of use.
- ✓ Implementing chosen design into official information material.

Year 2 (2017) – Implementing priority projects – Looking ahead

In 2017, the emphasis is on implementing the priority projects identified in 2016. This will build a solid base for a new tourist information system. The emphasis is on cooperation, coordination and support throughout the system, both regionally and nationally. Task for 2017 are:

- ✓ Implementation of priority projects identified in 2016.
- ✓ Analyse of information needs at different types of entry points (borders); large airports, smaller airports, ferry harbours, cruise harbours etc.
- ✓ Identifying priority projects for 2018

Year 3 (2018) – Final preparations and development

The final steps in the development phase of the project will be taken in 2018. Those steps will be decided in fall 2017, based on the status of the actions already in place.

- ✓ Implementation of priority base projects identified in 2017
- ✓ Cost analysis of a new system
- ✓ Negotiations with potential partners

Tourist information provision - ITB's vision

Iceland's unpredictable weather conditions and sensitive nature put safety issues at the top of the new tourist information system. This means that the focus is always on providing safety information and trying to influence the behaviour of visitors in a positive way so that tourism becomes more safe and sustainable. This is not done through scare tactics though, but through coordination, well-trained staff and clear communication procedures throughout the system.

The picture below shows the general vision ITB and the project team are working towards. The goal is to have a comprehensive support system responsible for coordination, support, communication and training (internal work) and a coordinated front providing quality information and quality experience for our visitors.

TOURIST INFORMATION SERVICES
- Tourist Information Centres
- Service partners
- Digital solutions
- Signage and marking

PURVIEW
Coordination
Support
Communication
Training

Safety issues

SUPPORT
Regional Offices
Safetravel

Quality, skills and environmental issues

Digital challenges and possibilities

Logo and design
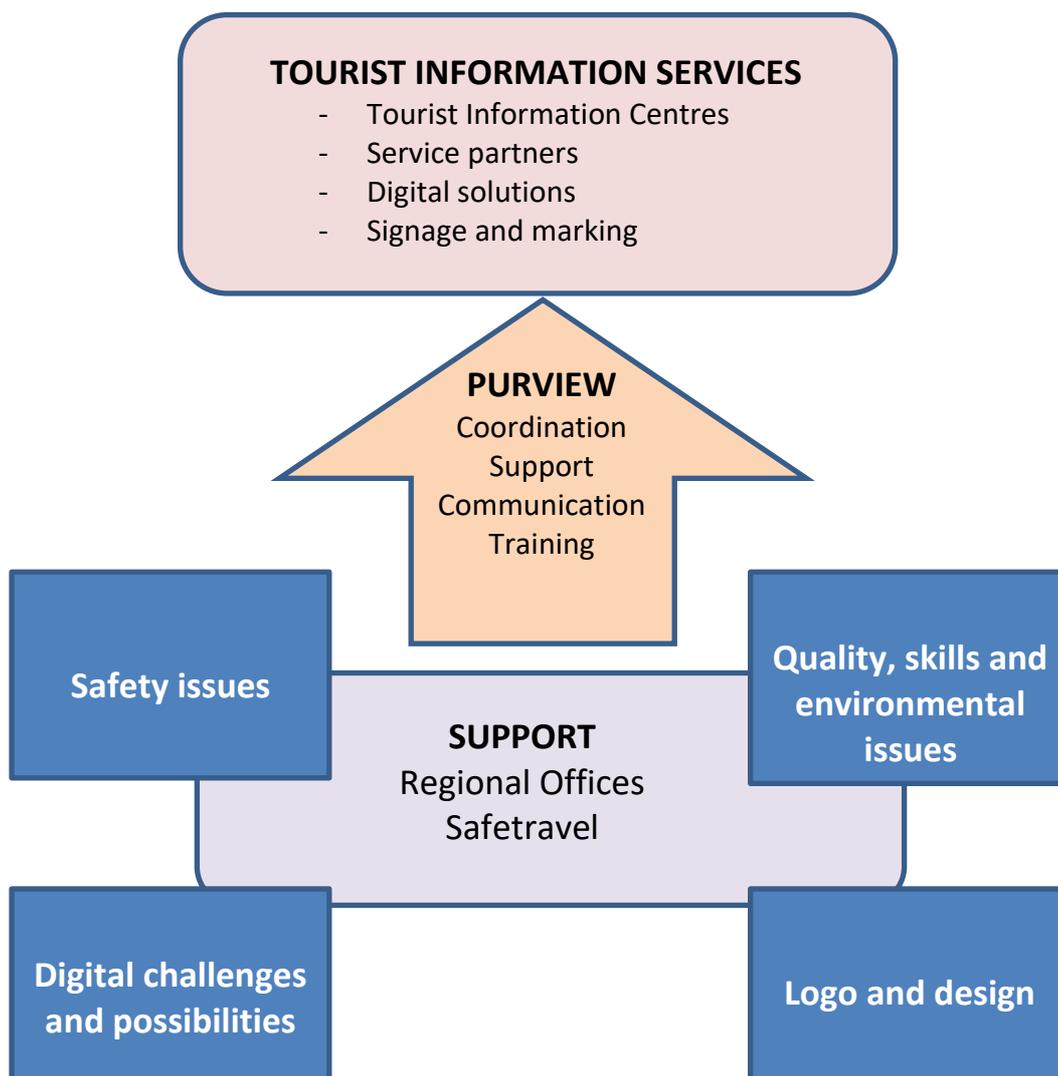
Picture 2 – A new support system

In 2016 regional workgroups delivered suggestions about where public tourist information centres should preferably be situated in their area. The blue dots represent regional/local centres and the orange ones entry points/borders. Please note the cruise ship harbours are not included. The different areas are identified on the map below with white lines. This picture could change as the project develops.
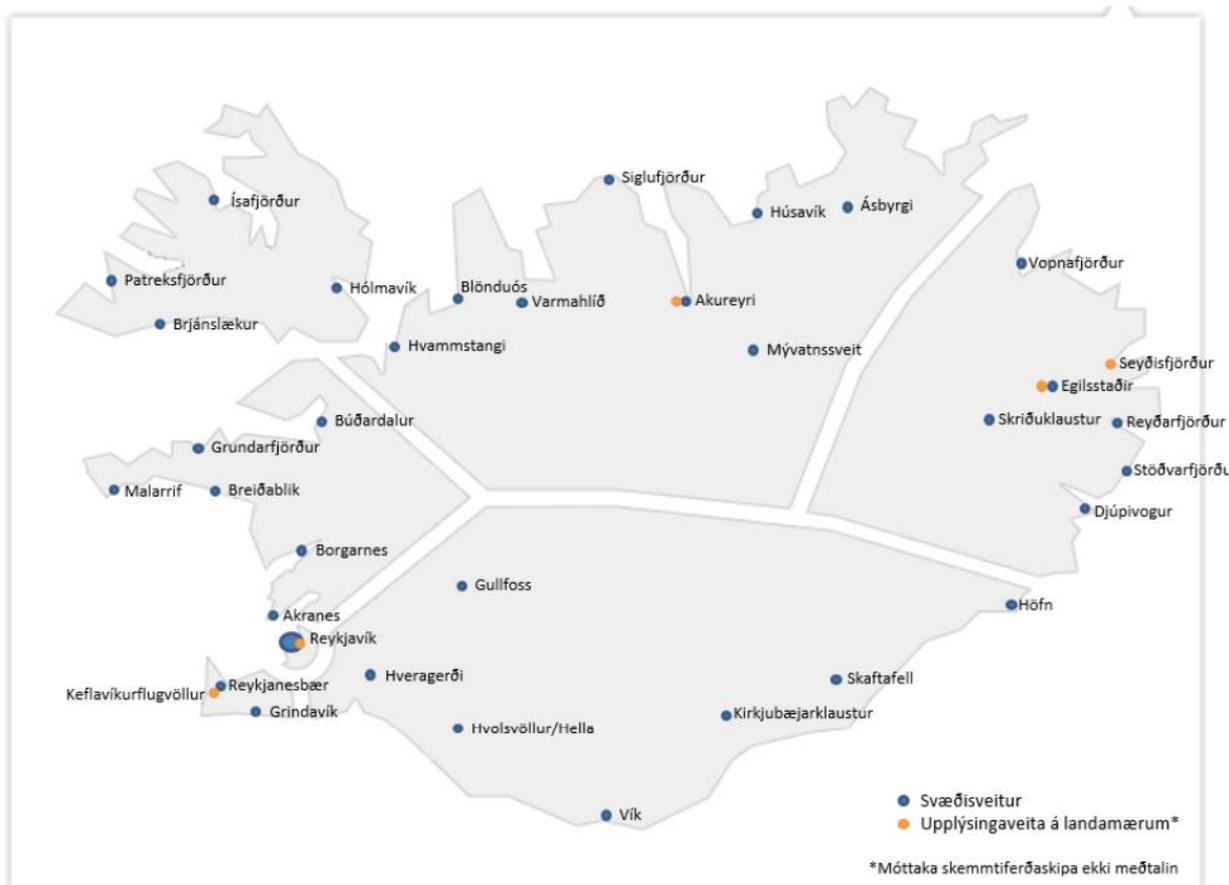
Picture 3 – A new coordinated system of public tourist information centres

Funding
ITB has secured funding for the development of a new system. Next year a cost analysis will show how much the system will cost and suggestions will be made on how to divide that cost between stakeholders (state – municipalities).

A major hindrance in the implementation of a new system could be an ongoing debate between state and municipalities on how to divide tourism revenues. As soon as that has been resolved, it should be easier to approach municipalities regarding mutual funding of the system.