

REPORT TO SCRUTINY COMMITTEE RESOURCES & EXECUTIVE

Date of Meeting: Scrutiny Committee Resources 16 March 2016

Executive 12 April 2016

Report of: Museum Manager & Cultural Lead

Title: St Nicholas Priory – Structural Repair and Future Operation

Is this a Key Decision?

No

* One that affects finances over £1m or significantly affects two or more wards. If this is a key decision then the item must be on the appropriate forward plan of key decisions.

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Council

1. What is the report about?

1.1 This report has been produced in response to the structural condition of St Nicholas Priory and to Members' request for a review of its income generating potential. The report considers the present condition of the building and proposes a course of action to address this. It also reviews current and potential future uses and management arrangements and proposes further steps towards identifying a sustainable future for the building.

2. Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

- (i) Members approve a capital budget of £115,000 to address urgent structural repair and building conservation issues;
- (ii) Members recommend that Arts Council England are approached about the de-accreditation of the site as a museum;
- (iii) Members approve further discussion with potential partners about community management of St Nicholas Priory; and
- (iv) follow up report is produced for Members decision once partnership negotiations are at a stage when they can be formalised

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

3.1 As one of the city's most important heritage buildings, ownership of the Grade I listed building brings with it a set of responsibilities for its care and preservation. The structural repairs currently under discussion are outlined in this committee report but once complete should stabilise the movement of this 1,000 year old building.

On an annual basis the building requires cyclical maintenance (e.g. fire alarm / electrical installation testing / system maintenance) and general reactive repair, which is budgeted for within the Property Maintenance Fund.

Assessment of future maintenance requirements by way of condition survey has identified a programme of required works to facilitate repair and preventative measures to preserve the building fabric. The identified priority works have been approved as part of a revenue bid to be delivered in the years 2016-18. The identified non-priority works will be subject to a further finance process and include items such as roof replacement and stone window frame repairs.

In addition to these previously ascertained maintenance priorities the newly identified structural issues raise the need for additional and immediate funding if the building is to be reopened.

Summary of Principal Structural Repairs Required:

a) The Reception Vault

A repair has to be carried out to the vault in the reception area as the consulting engineer has determined that the structure of the vault could collapse. It is proposed to reduce the load on the vault, requiring the design of a hanging structure that will keep the load from the partition, roof and second floor off the vault thereby reducing the point load and lifting the thrust lines back within the voussoir stones. The structure would be stainless steel and arched to get close to the arched profile of the arch bracing within the principal trusses.

The idea has received positive feedback from Historic England and their engineer. To move this forward Listed Building Consent will be required, incorporating detailed design by the engineer.

b) The Crypt/ Undercroft Vaulting

Some of the ribs to the crypt are not built tight to the vaults, implying that later modifications are no longer providing structural support in areas. These areas should be grouted to ensure the ribs are engaged and open joints should be pointed in with slate galleting ensuring the arching to the ribs is reliable. The ceiling finishes need to be consolidated, and a pinned solution is being considered with a mesh support either acting locally as a washer or used globally to hold the existing plaster in place with a new application encapsulating the existing. The worst case scenario is to support the entire existing ceiling area using a network of pins, with an encapsulating mesh and new lime plasterwork

3.2 Expenditure allocated to service delivery at St Nicholas Priory is very low and has relied on support and resources from RAMM. With increasing pressure on RAMM (longer opening hours; more events; delivering funder's targets) this is increasingly difficult. Diverting these resources to St Nicholas Priory achieves a lower 'return' in terms of public impacts and risks diminishing RAMM's own performance.

3.3 With this in mind and prior to its current closure, RAMM had undertaken a review of St Nicholas Priory's operation, looking at visitor patterns. It concluded that general opening across standard days/hours could not justify the investment of Visitor Services staff time (cost per 'visitor head'). A schedule of more focussed opening times relating to pre-booked visitors or advertised special events and a narrower band of opening times linked to holiday times and events had been planned instead. The support of volunteers was also easier to arrange around a more focussed schedule and would be critical to supporting visitor access to the site. This approach also created greater diary availability for other bookings such as weddings.

3.4 The structural issues that forced closure of St Nicholas Priory meant that there was limited opportunity to trial this approach. There are however questions around the long term sustainability and success of this approach, given the lack of dedicated marketing and promotion budget for the site. This would be necessary to raise the profile of the site and visitor footfall. The very basic operating budget of less than £5,000 per annum of which £1750 is for advertising, makes this unrealistic at present

(Underground Passages' budget of £19,000 shop, print, stationery provides an appropriate benchmark). Equally there is no dedicated budget for planning and delivering the special events that would be required to drive visitor numbers. Paid ticketed events carry a high level of risk around whether they operate in profit or deficit, particularly when the organisational costs are factored in to the budget. Scope to offer St Nicholas Priory as a wedding venue has been identified and less so for corporate hire but profits may be modest and a proportion will need reinvesting to develop the venue for this purpose.

- 3.5 Selling the building and alternative uses including offices have been discussed but these are limited, due to the difficult access, the practical constraints of the site and the historic building itself; the Grade 1 listed status restricts adaptation for other purposes. St Nicholas Priory also has limited heating, lighting and lack of running water within the historic element. These factors would all affect the market and the price realised for a property of this nature.
- 3.6 Given the City Council's ownership and level of previous investment, maintaining public access to St Nicholas Priory should remain a priority. Whilst it does not align with the objectives of the Corporate Property Maintenance Strategy 'mothballing' the building has been considered as an option. However, mothballing is not envisaged to release any short-term cost savings due to insurance premium increases for empty property as against some cyclical maintenance and minor operational savings. Longer term costs will escalate due to an increased likelihood of vandalism and the propensity for minor repairs, left unchecked, to escalate into significant building defects. As the Council has a duty of care to maintain a listed building substantial repairs would have to be undertaken. It is felt that mothballing would increase long-term resource requirement and restrict public access to one of the city's most historic and interesting buildings.
- 3.7 The building currently houses very few objects from the museum collection. It is primarily an historic property and for this reason this report recommends that RAMM applies to the Arts Council, England for its de-accreditation as a 'museum'. Accreditation is the UK standard for museums and galleries. It defines good practice and identifies agreed standards, thereby encouraging development. Generally it is an eligibility pre-requisite for museums applying for museum funding from government agencies and many private trusts and foundations. Its focus on collections management; users and their experiences means that it does not have the best fit with this site. De-accreditation should not affect any future applications to organisations such as the Heritage Lottery Fund which also funds heritage sites not classed as museums.
- 3.8 If approved, this decision opens up to subsequent possibility of transfer to community management bringing with it a dedicated focus. Whilst this is unlikely to reduce the City Council's identified building maintenance costs in the short term, it might be possible through operations or projects to bring community additionality to the use of the building and in the longer term to share some of the premises cost. Precisely what this might mean in terms of finance would be part of the partnership negotiation and is therefore at this time unknown.
- 3.9 A number of potential partner organisations have been considered. These are listed at '8.29'. From this list Exeter Historic Buildings Trust (EHBT) a registered charity and company Limited by Guarantee would appear to be an appropriate community partner. The charitable purposes of EHBT are 'to preserve for the benefit of the Exeter, buildings in and around the city of particular beauty or of historic or architectural merit'.

3.10 EHBT charitable purposes; special focus; ownership of the related adjacent 21 The Mint, together with their interest in working with other historic city centre sites (including RAMM) means that they would make an appropriate community partner.

3.11 An initial enquiry with EHBT has indicated that they would be open to further exploration of community asset transfer. The initial conversation explored the potential of EHBT running the site including delivering public access. This might include some of the existing activities described in this report but extend to include a broader range of community uses.

4. What are the resource implications including non-financial resources.

4.1 In line with the Corporate Property Maintenance Strategy the previously approved property maintenance budgets for this asset are:

Item	Budget
Annual Cyclical Servicing / Maintenance	1,200
Allocation for estimated reactive repairs	3,050
16-17 and 17-18 condition survey priorities	31,010

The unforeseen costs incurred to date investigating the structural defects to vault / crypt and beyond are:

Item	Value
Following initial propping to the reception vault actions including initial investigations, laser survey modelling, individual structural assessment and consultation with Heritage England.	4,200
Following identification of further structural deviation in crypt actions including CAD survey, investigation, consultation with Heritage England, assessment reporting, detailed conservator invasive investigation and assessment reporting.	7,981.25
Further to the previous identified structural defects it was determined essential to undertake a full structural survey of the entire building.	1,700
Total expenditure to date	13,881.25

Proposed funding required (in addition to condition survey priorities) to rectify structural defects:

Funding Requirement	Value
Laser scan of entire building	£2,250
Reception Vault:	
Detailed design, tender documents and site supervision of stainless steel truss for reception vault.	£5,000
Reception vault works estimate	£30,000

Crypt:	
Impulse Radar or GPR survey of crypt (GBG)	£7,000
Detailed design, tender documentation and site supervision of crypt repairs.	£6,500
Crypt ceiling repairs using conservator in accordance with structural engineer recommendations works estimate	£15,000
Historic building specialist coordinated analysis	£5,000
Structural defects identified from whole building structural survey	£27,000
Total envisaged future expenditure	£97,750

This amounts to a total cost of rectifying the structural defects at the Priory of £111,631.25 (including works carried out to date). Adding a small allowance for inflation gives a suggested capital budget of £115,000.

4.2 Taking forward the other proposals of this report will require the further involvement of the Corporate Property Unit; Legal Services and Museum in negotiating and formalising the partnership and making appropriate transfer arrangements. Any subsequent costs arising from these investigations will be presented in a separate report to Committee.

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

The costs if approved will be added to the 2016/17 budget. Any further resource implications will be considered at the appropriate time.

6. What are the legal aspects?

None identified

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

This report raises no issues for the Monitoring Officer.

8. Report details:

Background

8.1 St Nicholas Priory has a claim to being the oldest standing building in Devon (except for ruins and fragments) and its earliest portions display early Norman architecture rarely seen in the county. In later centuries this building was extended, remodelled, patched and restored, its rich variety of styles and materials reflecting its changing fortunes. First, it was part of a priory (a small monastery), then (after the Dissolution of the monasteries by King Henry VIII) and demolition of the Priory Church, its guest quarters it became the town house of a rich West Country family. Later it became a series of small tenements and finally, after 1913 was acquired by Exeter Corporation.

8.2 The ground it stands on is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (alongside Exeter Cathedral and Rougemont Castle) and is a Grade I listed building (a group of which

includes The Guildhall, Bishop's Palace, Mols Coffee shop). Recognition of its historical importance means that it is protected by legislation covered in the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. It is one of a group of medieval buildings The Guildhall, Exe Bridge, Tuckers Hall that contribute to the city's architectural character.

8.3 Structural Investigation

The following technical observations are from the Council's Senior Architectural Surveyor:

The brief to the structural engineer asked whether the building is safe for continued public access; in particular we required advice on whether the vaults need repairing and if so, how? What further investigations are needed? What load can be applied to the upper floors?

This led to our requirement for an assessment with proposals for:

- the crack in the reception area arch / vault;
- the crypt/ undercroft.

Reception Vault

The engineer's report states that a repair has to be carried out as the movements in the vault make it unreliable and the engineer could not guarantee its performance. The structure of the vault could snap and collapse; the causes are multiple; the report should be read for further details.

Structurally the partition on the first floor is located in the worst place, causing significant knife edge loading along a four centred arch at its flattest curvature.

To reduce the partition load, it is proposed to fit a hanging structure that will keep the load from the partition, roof and second floor off the vault thereby reducing the point load and lifting the thrust lines back within the voussoir stones. The structure would be stainless steel and arched to get close to the arched profile of the arch bracing within the principal trusses.

This is an elegant, clear and tangible modern intervention, reversible and visible. Initial ball-park figures are £25- £30k for this option. The idea received positive feedback from Historic England's Frances Kelly and their engineer Toby Murphy.

This design can be seen in appendix one to this report.

Crypt

The engineer requested in March 2015, that plaster should be removed to get a better idea of what is going on between the joints of the vaulting. However Historic England were not keen as 'to remove historic plaster, especially if primary or with historic validity would be a loss and harmful to the historic integrity of the heritage asset.'

They stated they would require listed building consent for the investigation works unless we devised a way forward with an 'Exchange of Letters' based on a full understanding of the significance and impacts, and using appropriate expertise. They favoured a staged approach to all of the investigations.

Therefore, we engaged conservation specialists to assess the significance of the plaster. They reported that 'there are significant cracks in the plaster and it is clear judging by the number of repairs that the ceiling has suffered from structural problems for a number of years', and they suggested after assessing it, that later plaster repairs should be removed by a conservator. This would reveal areas for viewing the structure where previous movement has occurred. We organised removal of the more recent additions, and in some places they used lime grouting to secure edges. Once again, specialists were engaged to examine the structure from above, and this has led to the recommendations by the engineer.

It is clear that some of the ribs are not built tight to the vaults. As they are a major starting point for the construction of the vaults this implies later modifications that are

no longer providing structural support in areas. These areas should be grouted to ensure the ribs are engaged and open joints should be pointed in with slate galleting ensuring the arching to the ribs is reliable.

The ceiling finishes need to be consolidated and a pinned solution should be considered with a mesh support either acting locally as a washer or used globally to hold the existing plaster in place with a new application encapsulating the existing. A conservator should be engaged to look at what techniques would be appropriate. Once the conservation repairs are completed, the engineer is confident that the Priory could be re-opened to the public and be used for events, although a restriction is advised on the use of the upper floors that would limit dynamic loadings; for example dancing or exercise classes.

It should be noted that the fabric is delicate, and Historic England are looking at what we are doing very closely. Historic England need to be persuaded that we are looking at all the possibilities and arriving at the correct answer.

The full report showing whole building structural survey, reception vault survey and crypt survey is included as appendix 2.

- 8.4 St Nicholas Priory is accredited as a museum by Arts Council England. Presentation of St Nicholas Priory is currently as the building might have appeared in 1602, when it is thought to have been home to William Hurst a wealthy merchant. It is furnished with replica furniture and artefacts. This was made possible in 2007 by significant funding (£50,000) from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. A research project informed our knowledge of St Nicholas Priory and Exeter in this period. Costumes to try on and games, toys and other items offer an insight into Tudor life and provide visitors with an immersive 'living history' experience of the building.
- 8.5 The new presentation of St Nicholas Priory was particularly popular and successful with schools, where RAMM was able to offer enriched educational visits. However the shifting focus of the national curriculum and the loss of external funding which previously enabled the museum to offer significant financial subsidy to schools' visits has meant numbers have since declined.
- 8.6 General visitor numbers are also relatively low. School visits gave numbers a boost following the Heritage Lottery Fund project but have since fallen achieving only 3714 in 2012/13. The 'tucked away' location of St Nicholas Priory, at The Mint between Fore Street and Bartholomew St has been a long standing barrier to attracting visitors (residents or tourists). There is no vehicular access and signage from Fore Street is very problematic. The historic nature of the building means lighting and heating is relatively 'background', limiting the use of the building during the winter. The kitchen is the medieval one of the original building and offers no facilities for modern day catering/refreshments (no running water). Internet connection is weak.
- 8.7 The 2015/16 cost centre revenue budget for St Nicholas Priory totals £36,580. Of the non-notional budgets (15,750) the majority of costs relate to the building overheads: alarm, utilities, refuse, phones, rates, etc. Operating costs amount to £2,960. Income targets on this basis of delivery is set at £4,690. Cyclical and estimated reactive maintenance total £4,250. In 2016/17 the advertising expenditure of £1750 has been temporarily removed along with the income targets as St Nicholas priory is expected to be closed for repair for much of the year.

Item	Budget
Overheads	
Central Alarm Service	5430
Electricity	2220
Cleaning Materials	260
Water	160
Water Monitoring And Servicing	10
Trade Refuse	320
Business Rates	530
	8930
Property Maintenance	
Cyclical Maintenance	1200
Reactive Repairs	3050
	4250
Insurance	
Block Policy	2370
	2370
Operating Costs	
Equipment Tools And Materials	250
Advertising	1750
Bank Charges	710
Licences	250
	2960
Recharges	
Financial Services	650
Property Assets Team	1280
	1930
Income	
Fees	-3120
Day Admissions	-520
Casual Lettings	-1050
	-4690
Total recurring costs	15750
Notional Charges	
Depreciation	20830
Overall Recurring Asset Cost (Revenue Budget)	36580

In addition to the ongoing annual revenue allocation, there is an approved budget for programmed maintenance to the asset which totals £31,010 and will be delivered across the 16-17 and 17-18 financial years.

Identified capital works for delivery in approximately five years include the replacement of roof coverings c.£85,000 and the repair of stone window surrounds c.£18,000. These works will be the subject of future report proposals.

In respect of the current structural issues this report has set out a total spend requirement of £115,000.

Service Delivery

- 8.8 St Nicholas Priory has no separate staffing. Public opening draws on RAMM's Visitor Services Team, with considerable support from volunteers who assist with the presentation and visitor interpretation. The demands on the Visitor Services Team who also cover RAMM's weekend and evening openings, makes volunteer involvement, essential to opening and animating the site.
- 8.9 To target use of our resources and drive further staffing efficiencies a revised plan was put in place from October 2014 with St Nicholas Priory largely closed over the winter and opening for advertised pre-booked visits and tours and special themed events the rest of the year. These events would have been actively promoted through RAMM's publicity, Tourist Information, Red Coat Guides and as part of festivals and pre-booked school visits
- 8.10 In the past, special themed events have been successful at St Nicholas Priory. These have included volunteer led guided tours and special public events at St Nicholas Priory for instance 'Exploring the Vertues of Herbes' – the use of herbs in the Tudor kitchen and as natural remedies; medieval music recitals. The building is also opened as part of the 'Heritage Open Days' festival in September/October. Planning, arranging and scheduling these events incur 'hidden' organisational costs (borne by RAMM) over and above the costs of the event itself. The site has also been used with partners, for instance 'Four Swords Theatre Company' performance of Dr Faustus. The cost of opening the building (providing visitor services staff to manage the site) for special events has to be carefully factored into agreements with partners as it can have an inadvertent impact on tight rotas and commitments at RAMM.
- 8.11 This targeted approach of openings has allowed RAMM to focus visits at a particular time rather than spreading visitor numbers across a regular pattern of opening hours which has on occasions generated very low visitor numbers.
- 8.12 There has been little opportunity since the structural problems were identified to develop this approach. Public services and access to the site have been suspended. RAMM was beginning to experiment with offering St Nicholas Priory as a venue for wedding ceremonies and a number of booked weddings have had to be cancelled. These had been secured through 'word of mouth' promotion and Devon County Council web site. A planned marketing campaign around weddings at the venue had not been activated – which would otherwise have exacerbated the cancellation problem.

Income Generation

- 8.13 The Priory is a unique and very special part of the city centre, with potential to play a more significant role in Exeter's destination offer. The building itself; the strong story line and Tudor Home presentation with replica furniture and dressing provides the ingredients of a distinctive experience not offered elsewhere in the city.
- 8.14 With the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and the former Museums, Libraries & Archives Council the City Council has been able to develop the site and its presentation as an 'immersive' historic experience, but limited operational resources have restricted the ability to develop its services or to strengthen the links with other parts of the city heritage offer.
- 8.15 St Nicholas Priory is currently one of the city's 'hidden gems' but is a place to 'discover' that could make a visit to Exeter particularly memorable for tourists and visitors to the city. A closer association with the Underground Passages (13,880

visitors pa) through joint ticketing would also offer scope to encourage visitors exploration of the city. Stronger links with other parts of the city's tourism offer specifically focussing on heritage, Underground Passages, Customs House, Guildhall, and Red Coat Guides would help strengthen this hidden city corner's contribution to the city's destination offer.

8.16 Although RAMM provides Visitor Services (security) and volunteer support for the building, it has not been possible to divert significant time from other staff to this venue without diminishing delivery of RAMM's own performance and income targets.

8.17 Efforts to make St Nicholas Priory more sustainable in its own right have included explorations of the following areas:

- Weddings
- Corporate hire
- Organised tours
- Programmed activities
- Project funding

- Wedding Ceremonies

8.18 Market Considerations affecting wedding business development include the competitive nature of this field. Although Exeter has many venues licensed for wedding ceremonies, the majority of these are hotels. The feedback, following on from a site visit from an experienced Wedding Consultant, is that the Priory is a very special place which could be in heavy demand within three years if a dedicated promotion plan is put in place for the venue. They advised it could be placed alongside other top historical sites when positioning the venue in the market. St Nicholas Priory offers a very unique setting and atmosphere for a ceremony.

8.19 The building's limitations; lack of running water (apart from lavatory), occupancy numbers (60 maximum in Great Chamber) plus likely restrictions on activity (no dancing) together with no parking and proximity of neighbours, means that the focus has been on ceremonies rather than receptions.

8.20 The Priory would need to be able to deliver its offer at the same professional level as the other top wedding venues in Exeter. Delivering a targeting promotion campaigning and offering a professional on-site service would be important to its success. Once an established venue there would be scope to develop a relationship with a handful of wedding consultants and possibly local hotels, negotiating a commission arrangement.

8.21 This business growth would need be supported by a dedicated part time member of staff to support the 'selling' of the venue to couples, bookings, event organisation and delivery. As business grows so would the demands on this person's time, while some profit would also need to be 'ploughed' back (reinvested) into the developing new business. Given St Nicholas Priory's restrictions there is little opportunity to factor in the 'additionality' (usually the reception) that would in other commercial settings allow for a greater profit margin. Net profits are relatively modest.

8.22 The following figures had formerly been projected for St Nicholas Priory for the three year period 2016/17 to 2018/19. This assumes the Priory re-opens in Spring 2017.

Table 1

	Income		Expenditure		Net profit
Year 1 (2017/18)	15 weddings X £750 each	£11,250	Marketing & Promotion £3,000 Administration £4,500 Service & delivery £1500 Business reinvestment £2,000 Licence £500	£11,000	£,250
Year 2 (2018/19)	20 weddings X £750 each	£15,000	Marketing & Promotion £2,500 Administration £6,000 Service & delivery £2,000 Business reinvestment £2,000 Licence £500	£13,000	£2,000
Year 3 (2019/20)	30 weddings X £750 each	£22,500	Marketing & Promotion £2,000 Administration £9,000 Service & delivery £3,000 Business reinvestment Licence £500	£16,500	£6,000

- Corporate Hire

8.23 Corporate hire of RAMM's space already generates important income for the museum and this opportunity could be offered at the Priory. The main constraint is the restriction on numbers, catering practicalities, lack of projection and audio facilities and limited internet connection. In practice this type of event may be limited to late spring/summer drinks and canapé functions for small groups, meaning the market is a small one and marginal in terms of income generation.

- Organised Tours

8.24 With volunteer support RAMM has been able to deliver and charge for organised tours of the Priory. These guided visits enrich visitors' understanding of the building and the volunteers commitment provides welcome income but is in part, offset by the staff costs of providing special opening of the building.

- Programme of Activities

8.25 A programme of activities encompassing schools, groups, concerts, holiday activities, performances might over time generate income but would require an initial outlay to develop and market the programme to the public. The programme, because of heating limitations, would be limited to warmer months. Additionally it would require staffing resources to schedule, organise, deliver all of these activities together with a materials budget which, when balanced against audience take-up, may well leave the programme running at 'break even' or possibly deficit.

8.26 This type of programme might also involve partner organisation's use of the venue. Four Swords' performances in autumn 2014 were a successful example of this type of collaboration, though past experience suggests lack of understanding about the time/costs of running a building and an expectation of 'indirect council subsidy', means the cost of contributing of opening and staffing the building is often a barrier to taking joint projects forward.

- Project Funding

8.27 Project funding would support further focussed schemes of work and activity at St Nicholas Priory. The site has benefited from Heritage Lottery Funding which transformed presentation of the site into a Tudor home (representing one phase of its history). Other projects might follow but will depend on capacity and resources to undertake the detailed planning and writing of applications, followed by project delivery. RAMM is not able to take this additional work on, as its focus is on bid writing for the museum and its audiences.

Annie Evans, the Heritage at Risk Officer for Historic England states:

"Historic England is the Government's adviser on all aspects of the historic environment. As part of our work we undertake assessments of designated heritage assets to identify whether they are 'at risk'. We consider sites to be at risk either because of problems of decay and dilapidation, or because they are vulnerable to certain pressures from human activities or natural processes. A site being placed on the register *does not necessarily* imply that it has been neglected: There are many factors that can lead to a site being included on our register, and we appreciate that these are often outside of the control of the owner or occupier. The aim of the register is to keep attention focussed on heritage assets facing difficulties, to aid their protection. In relation to this, Historic England provides advice and help to owners to assist with management of the site. Placing the site on the register will also unlock opportunities for grant aid, both through Historic England and where appropriate with other agencies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund."

It should be noted that grant organisations like the Heritage Lottery Fund typically invites projects that support both heritage and people's engagement with heritage; requiring public involvement, whether it is through involvement or managed activity. Recipient organisations should have capacity to deliver in both these areas.

- Other delivery models

8.28 The existing budget breakdown in item 8.7 indicates that the base costs of building operations are £36,580 and the identified five year condition survey programme costs are £134,010 and represent the City Council's costs and responsibilities as owner of a Grade I listed building. As an asset St Nicholas Priory offers some unique opportunities through its special history, character and atmosphere. Embedded within these opportunities are some very particular challenges because of its 'tucked away' location; listed status; limited services. The City Council has not been able to fully resource the site for service delivery and activity has in the past been supported from RAMM. Going forward this is not sustainable and is unlikely to meet Members' expectations. One alternative may be to consider involving community partnership in the running of the site.

8.29 There are several organisations involved in managing historic properties but St Nicholas Priory would be of limited interest to some. The National Trust normally requires a financial endowment to underpin its long-term care of newly acquired

properties. The Landmark Trust saves buildings and encourages people's enjoyment of them as places to stay (holiday homes). In the case of St Nicholas Priory this would lead to restricted public access. Devon Historic Buildings Trust business model is based on rescuing buildings, undertaking restoration and then selling on the open market. Sale of St Nicholas Priory in this way is unlikely to be an acceptable solution for a building currently in public ownership.

- 8.30 A more local option exists with Exeter Historic Buildings Trust (EHBT). It is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. EHBT already own 21 The Mint and the Courtyard Garden acquiring it as a rescue and restoration project. 21 The Mint was formerly the refectory wing of St Nicholas Priory. Part of the building is a domestic let; another part for community use. There are regular 'open days'. The Trust is interested in developing its educational work around the history of St Nicholas Priory precinct.
- 8.31 An initial 'without prejudice' enquiry with EHBT has indicated that they would be open to further exploration of a transfer of operational arrangements. Taking these forward would be dependent on Scrutiny Committee's decision.
- 8.32 EHBT's interest in St Nicholas Priory would be in its educational, community and public access use. The Trust has a strong partnership approach and would look to pursue collaborations with other historic sites in the city centre: Tuckers Hall, Guild Hall etc. ensuring that St Nicholas Priory plays its role within this dimension of the city's destination offer.
- 8.33 Initial conversations suggest that in regard to St Nicholas Priory there is a good alignment between the City Council's stewardship of the site and the charitable and local purposes of EHBT. If Members accept the principle outlined in this report the conversation can be taken forward to discuss the possible form of operational transfer to a community body.
- 8.34 Members would be updated in a further report.

9. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?

- 9.1 As possibly one of Devon's oldest standing buildings, St Nicholas Priory is one of the city's most important historic assets. Its re-presentation as a Tudor Home (one chapter of its history) has been a way of bringing a human context to the building, providing insight into Tudor life. The buildings history and unique atmosphere offers considerable potential to the city's destination offer of choices for visitors and tourists to the city. Extending visitors city centre stay helps support Exeter's economy as well as delivering against Corporate Purpose 'Provide great things for me to see and do'.

10. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?

- 10.1 If the principal recommendation of community management of the site is approved further discussions can be held. These involve no risk. A second report will be provided to Members when discussions reach a stage and are ready to be formalised. The discussions are an opportunity to identify, address and minimise any risk for the City Council.
- 10.2 If approved, cost management of the budget to undertake required structural repairs and ongoing capital maintenance obligations has the risk of increasing beyond approved values. This is due to the historic nature of the property and the resultant unknown elements that may be uncovered during works necessitating a temporary

cessation of works so that Heritage England may perform examinations or an alteration to the scope of work. To provide as much mitigation of this risk as is feasible Corporate Property have engaged with Historic England officers and Historic England approved specialists from the outset of this matter; therefore, the designs and cost estimates made to date are of the highest standard available in respect of the information available.

11. What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?

11.1 There is a small admission charge for entry to St Nicholas Priory. Concessionary rates are offered to holders of the Xcard. The recommendations to transfer operation of the site to a community based organisation offers, given appropriate safeguards in the partnership agreement, opportunity to extend community usage and its benefits as a resource to a wide range of groups.

12. Are there any other options?

12.1 Once the building structure is stabilised, Members may choose to continue with the status quo, accepting the relatively low visitor numbers and usage of the site.

12.2 It is possible to provide structural propping to all areas of structural instability to prevent further movement. This would negate the need for significant expenditure in the short term; however, this action would also necessitate the permanent closure of the asset, losing the ability for the public to view this historically significant property and facet of Exeter's history.

**Camilla Hampshire
Museums Manager & Cultural Lead**

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

None

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Appendix Two

St Nicolas Priory Structural Report