

REPORT TO PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: 8 September 2016

Report of: TOURISM FACILITIES PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Is this a Key Decision?

No

Is this an Executive or Council Function?

Executive

1. What is the report about?

To update Members on the performance of the tourism facilities - Exeter Visitor Information & Tickets (EVIT), Underground Passages, Custom House Visitor Centre & Red Coat Guided Tours.

2. Recommendations:

That Place Scrutiny Committee notes and comments on the content of the report.

3. Reasons for the recommendation:

This is an annual report to update Members on the performance of these facilities and attractions.

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

Other than existing revenue budgets there are no resource implications.

5. Section 151 Officer comments:

There are no additional financial implications contained in this report.

6. What are the legal aspects?

None identified

7. Monitoring Officer's comments:

This report raises no issues for the Monitoring Officer.

8. BACKGROUND

8.1 The tourism facilities are part of the Facilities & Markets section of Economy. The section also encompasses the Matford Centre, Corn Exchange, Leisure Facilities Contract Management and Markets. The Tourism Facilities are managed by the Visitor Facilities Officer (VFO) reporting to the Events, Facilities and Markets Manager.

8.2 Much of the work of the tourism facilities crosses over with the Economy & Tourism section. Strong ties exist between the two sections.

- 8.3 In recent years due to the customer facing nature of the facilities a number of additional tasks have been taken on whilst other areas within the Council (such as the Canal Office and The City Centre Manager) have been affected by restructuring.
- 8.4 The purpose of the tourism facilities is to assist in the delivery of the Exeter Visitor Strategy and the Council's stated purpose 'to provide great things to do, see and visit'.

9. EXETER VISITOR INFORMATION AND TICKETS (EVIT)

- 9.1 EVIT carries out a number of different functions. Primarily it operates an information service to residents and visitors to the city. The centre also operates a retail function, an accommodation booking service and a box office selling tickets for shows and events in Exeter and the surrounding area.
- 9.2 Other functions include a front line liaison with tourism businesses within the local area including hotels, attractions and places to eat and drink. The staff also assist in the production of the tourism literature produced by Exeter City Council and undertake other occasional/seasonal duties such as providing staffing cover at the various events.
- 9.3 Staff at EVIT have, since March 2015, been responsible for administering the booking of the banner sites throughout the City Centre, a role previously carried out by the City Centre Manager. To date this has raised £2,300 additional income.
- 9.4 With the relocation of the canal office administrator into the Civic Centre, staff at EVIT have assisted with selling electricity cards to boat owners and issuing fishing permits. To date this has generated £1,410 of income
- 9.5 Since September 2015 EVIT has been one of the Key Exchange points for the Exeter Pound, to date £6,455 of Exeter pounds have been exchanged by individuals, and a total of £8,728.00 has been banked by local independent businesses.
- 9.6 EVIT acted as a key information point during the RWC in 2015, as well as selling merchandise within the centre the staff from EVIT manned a shop at the RWC fanzone, following the withdrawal the official RWC merchandiser from the fanzone. In total £8,985 of RWC stock was sold
- 9.7 EVIT opens 6 days a week all year round and is staffed with 3.2 full time equivalents.
- 9.8 The role of EVIT and the way it functions has evolved in recent years as people change the way they access information by using websites, emails and by phone. In the recent past there was a downward trend of people visiting the centre allowing the centre staff to devote time to enquiries made by different media. This trend appears to have slowed, probably as a result of the additional functions that the centre has taken on.
- 9.9 The Table below highlights how the centre has handled enquiries in recent years:

	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	Trend*
Number of visitors to EVIT	55,925	55,250	53,215	53,175	-2%
Number of other EVIT users (telephone/emails/letters)	28,085	32,637	34,741	44,787	+28
Total number of enquiries handled by EVIT staff	84,010	87,887	87,956	97,962	+10%

* Trend - To calculate the trend the result for 2015/16 is compared to the average result over the four year period to show the percentage increase or decrease achieved in 2015/16.

- 9.10 In the current financial year the number of visitors to EVIT (until end of July) was 20,473 representing a 3% decrease on the same period year. The number of other centre users was 18,429 a 27% increase on last year. Overall the number of users to date was 38,902, an 8% increase on last year.
- 9.11 The centre's box office facility activity continues to grow. EVIT acts as a ticket agent for theatres, shows and events throughout the area, including the Northcott Theatre, Corn Exchange, and Theatre Royal. EVIT also sells National Express tickets and coach tour tickets. EVIT gains an income through ticket sales commission. This year EVIT became an agent for additional suppliers, including being the sole ticket agent for the prestigious Two Moors Festival. Up until the end of July EVIT had sold £4,800 worth of Two Moors Festival tickets generating £238 in commission. To date this year EVIT has sold 1,229 tickets at a total value of £35,438 generating a commission of £1,660

Below is a summary of ticket sales and resultant income over the past 5 years.

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	Trend*
Tickets Sold	4,787	4,327	5,653	4,411	4223	-10%
Value of Sales	£99,000	£75,000	£112,000	£113,000	£107,000	+6%
Clients	27	25	25	29	29	+7%
Commission raised	£5,960	£4,286	£5,339	£7,927	£6,078	+3%

* Trend - To calculate the trend the result for 2015/16 is compared to the average result over the five year period to show the percentage increase or decrease achieved in 2015/16.

- 9.12 Last year the Corn Exchange changed their box office system to Spektrix, this system is also used by many theatres in the local area, this will allow EVIT to provide greater flexibility in its ticketing services and afford the opportunity to provide a greater range of tickets for external organisations. The VFO is currently in negotiation with Exeter Northcott about having direct access to their booking system.
- 9.13 A great emphasis is placed on the need to provide a service of quality. Customer satisfaction surveys carried out in 2015 help demonstrate that a high quality of service is being achieved - see appendix one. (An additional survey will take place this summer as the current sample size was too small to make any meaningful conclusions)
- 9.14 In 2014 the main tourism publication to promote Exeter changed to a guide solely focussed on Exeter (the Visit Exeter Guide). Previously the emphasis was on a broader geographical area. Due to workload issues in 2015 the staff were not able to assist in obtaining advertising income for the 2016 Visitor Guide. However using the experience gained from previous years it is hoped that the staff will be able to assist in gaining advertising fees for the 2017 guide.
- 9.15 One of the biggest challenges currently facing EVIT is the cost of providing the service. The centre has had its revenue budget reduced by 17% in the previous 4 years, from £153,000 in 2010/12 to £127,000 for the last financial year. To operate within this reduced budget (and to maintain the level of service offered) there is an increasing emphasis on targeting increased income. In the current financial year the revenue budget has increased to £143,000, the reason for this increase is due to the transfer of some of the salary costs for the Visitor Facilities Officer and the Events & Facilities Manager from other cost centres.

- 9.16 Income levels from retail sales have remained reasonably constant over the last 3 years. In the current financial year income from retail sales to the end of June is £3980 this is a 2% increase on the same period last year.
- 9.17 Since May 2016, EVIT has become the base for the BID ambassadors. Not only does this arrangement generate some income for EVIT, it also helps to regenerate a mutually beneficial relationship between both parties
- 9.18 The Visitor Facilities Officer is exploring a number of initiatives to increase income, these include:
- Seek to increase number of venues and events for ticket sales to take advantage of access to the Corn Exchange's Spektrix box office system
 - Introduction of City Centre left luggage facility
- 9.19 The VFO will continue to explore opportunities to increase footfall and income to the centre opportunities include greater use of the paved area outside the centre and to investigate sharing the centre with a third party. In 2017 opportunities may arise from the bus station redevelopment.

10 EXETER'S UNDERGROUND PASSAGES

- 10.1 Exeter's Underground Passages is a unique tourist attraction. The centre offers guided tours of Medieval Vaulted passageways that were built to bring a fresh water supply to the city.
- 10.2 The Underground Passages are registered as an Ancient Scheduled Monument by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. The City Council has an obligation to maintain the passages and to ensure that they are not allowed to deteriorate.
- 10.3 As well as the standard tours for visitors; the centre offers tours for groups and a number of special events throughout the year. The special events include:
- Easter Egg Hunts
 - Beneath the Blitz
 - Witches & Wizards Tours
 - Gory Stories & Extreme Gory Stories
 - Victorian Christmas

This Christmas it is planned to expand the Victorian Christmas event.

- 10.4 The centre is open all year round, but has a reduced opening pattern in the winter. The centre is open seven days a week in the peak season (June - September, and school holidays outside this period) and six days a week outside this period. The centre is staffed by 4.2 full

time equivalents. The day to day operations at the Underground Passages are co-ordinated by the Underground Passages Supervisor.

- 10.5 Health and safety at the Underground Passages is paramount and the current staffing levels ensure that the Underground Passages can operate safely.
- 10.6 The Underground Passages have continued to perform well and the number of visitors and the amount of income earned has improved since re-opening in 2007. The table below shows income and visitors over the last eight financial years (since the passages were re-opened to the public):

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2014/15	Trend
Visitors	18,737	18,505	19,854	20,553	19,937	20,688	21,497	21,183	+5%
Income	£64,000	£74,000	£67,000	£74,000	£71,000	£81,000	£83,000	£88,000	+17%
Groups	102	92	86	100	76	100	87	82	-10%

Trend – To calculate the trend the result for 2015/16 is compared to the average result over the eight year period to show the percentage increase or decrease achieved in 2015/16.

- 10.7 To date in the current financial year the Underground Passages have welcomed 7,414 visitors (5% decrease on last year), with a resultant income of £29,344 (1% decrease on last year)
- 10.8 The emphasis of service provision at the Underground Passages is one of quality; In 2015 the attraction maintained its accreditation of Visit England's Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme. In the report from Visit England the assessor states that *"Exeter Underground Passages offers a unique experience with very good customer care and extremely knowledgeable guides."*
- 10.9 Once again the Passages were awarded a 'Certificate of Excellence' from Trip Advisor.
- 10.10 In 2015 visitor surveys were undertaken and the results were extremely positive, see appendix one.
- 10.11 A continuing challenge for the Underground Passages will be to reduce operational costs. Over the past four years the revenue budget has been reduced by 14% from £96,000 in 2010 to £83,000 in 2015. In the current financial year the revenue budget has increased to £85,550, the reason for this increase is due to the transfer of some of the salary costs for the Visitor Facilities Officer and the Events & Facilities Manager from other cost centres.
- 10.12 In October 2015 the Underground Passages hosted a special Halloween event for Exeter Phoenix Media Centre.
- 10.13 The VFO is investigating ways to increase the number of visitors and so improve income. Initiatives include:
- Development of additional special events
 - Use of attraction for events and functions
 - Partnership with the Sidwell Street Community Centre's heritage project

11 CUSTOM HOUSE VISITOR CENTRE

- 11.1 The Custom House had operated as a visitor centre since May 2015. The centre provides visitor information, historical interpretation about the Custom House, Quayside and the canal, alongside a small retail operation. The centre opens 7 days a week in the peak season (April - October) and at weekends for the rest of the year. It is staffed by 0.9 full time equivalents.
- 11.2 Moving the Visitor Centre from the Quay House to the Custom House has been a resounding success. This move was made possible because the Exeter Canal & Quay Trust (ECQT) purchased the long term lease of the Custom House and felt that the building would be better used as a visitor centre.
- 11.3 The funding of a visitor centre is primarily through a grant from ECQT. The grant funding has been in place since 2008 with ECQT providing funds on a rolling three year agreement.
- 11.4 The Trust has agreed to provide £50,000 per annum to run the centre. Exeter City Council is providing £490 in 2016/17. The grant will be reviewed after a full year's operation when actual costs have been established. In 2015/16 the Custom House operated within its forecast budget and a small surplus was carried forward.
- 11.5 The first phase of the development of the Custom House is now completed, with all the displays and interpretation now finished and installed. It is hoped that in 2 years time that in partnership with ECQT that funding can be obtained from the Heritage Lottery for a full refurbishment of the Custom House to take place therefore providing a facility and visitor attraction of regional significance. In the meantime the VFO has been in contact with the HMRC and has sourced a number of objects and artefacts from other Custom Houses around Devon, which will hopefully go on display soon
- 11.6 The centre acts as a hub for the Quayside area and provides information to visitors, residents and traders in this popular part of the city.
- 11.7 The table below highlights the performance of the Quay House and Custom House over the past 6 years:

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	Trend*
Visitor Numbers	22,951	26,423	25,742	24,732	25,131	27,846	+9%
Number of group bookings	146	282	230	206	207	145	-28%
Income	£2,450	£4,150	£3,630	£3,170	£3,570	£6,297	+62%

Trend - To calculate the trend the result for 2015/16 is compared to the average result over the 6 year period to show the percentage increase or decrease achieved in 2015/16.

The principle reason for the drop in group bookings was the change in location which meant that the 20 minute DVD presentation was not installed until part way through the season. In the current year group visits have returned to the level that would normally be expected

- 11.8 This year the Custom House Visitor Centre has performed well attracting 14,865 visitors to date (21% increase on last year's figures) and obtaining an income of £3195 (16% increase on last year)
- 11.9 Income levels have exceeded expectations; there are a number of reasons for this:
- Improved ticketing for events

- Room Hire for functions
- Establishment of pop-up Art/Craft Galleries on which a commission is charged on all sales to date there has been £3,375 of art sales generating £675 of commission

The new centre offers a greater opportunity to generate income, a charging structure for room hire has been developed

- 11.10 Since 2013 the staff based at Quay House/Custom House have been responsible for co-ordinating the booking of the Transit Shed and Piazza Terracina for events. This service is more efficient than it had been in the past and is assisting in generating much more activity on the Quay. Last year the total number of bookings were 68 (41 in the Transit Shed, 20 on the Piazza and 7 within the Custom House). This year to date there are a total 75 bookings already confirmed (36 in the Transit Shed, 24 on the Piazza and 15 within the Custom House). The types of events are varied but include such events as street food markets, Jazz on the Quay and craft markets which are all extremely popular.
- 11.11 With the relocation of the canal office administrator into the Civic Centre, staff at the Custom House have assisted with selling electricity cards to boat owners and issuing fishing permits. To date this has generated £3,826 income
- 11.12 The emphasis of service delivery at the Quay House and now the Custom House is one of quality. Accreditation from the Visit England's Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance scheme will be sought later this year. The key findings of the Custom House Visitor Centre Visitor Satisfaction Survey are highlighted in appendix one.
- 11.13 A challenge for the centre in the future is to increase the number of visitors, particularly group visits, it is hoped to develop some education packages that may appeal to local schools. Recent new developments on the quayside and the potential for future developments and the increasing number of events taking place at the quayside should attract more visitors to the area as well as encouraging more event organisers to use the area.

12 RED COAT GUIDED TOURS

- 12.1 The Red Coat Guided Tour Service provides historic tours of Exeter and operate every day of the year except Christmas Day and Boxing Day.
- 12.2 The service is delivered by 33 volunteer Red Coat guides, and are co-ordinated by the VFO.
- 12.3 In April 6 new guides completed 5 months of training and were awarded their red blazers by the Lord Mayor
- 12.4 The service offers a series of free public tours with a summer programme of 29 tours a week (16 different tours) and a winter tour programme of 15 tours a week (11 different tours). Alongside the public tours a group tour service operates, offering a variety of different tours to school groups, language schools, local history groups and twinning visits. A charge is made for the group tours.
- 12.5 The Service also offers a number of special tours throughout the year, including Spooks & Broomsticks on Halloween, Exeter Blitz on 4 May and involvement in the annual Heritage Open Days event.

12.6 The Table below highlights the performance of the service over the past 5 years:

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	Trend*
Visitor Numbers	15,202	14,048	14,863	13,880	13,074	-8%
Income	£8,218	£7,531	£8,955	£8,177	£6,297	-20%
Number of Group Bookings	N/A	148	162	160	145	-6%

Trend = To calculate the trend the result for 2014/15 is compared to the average result over the 5 year period to show the percentage increase or decrease achieved up to 2014/15.

The performance in 2015/16 was particularly disappointing, however levels of business have returned to expected levels in the current financial year.

- 12.7 In the financial year to date the Red Coat tours have attracted 5,969 visitors (8% increase on last year) and have generated £4,100 income (53% increase on last year)
- 12.8 The guides are very distinctive and are all proud to be ambassadors for the city. The quality of the service was recognised when they were awarded the 'Trip Advisor 2016 Certificate of Excellence'. This prestigious award places the Guided Tours in the top performing 10% of all businesses worldwide (as measured by Trip Advisor). This is the fourth year in a row that this award has been received.
- 12.9 In 2015 a visitor satisfaction survey measured visitors' opinions of the service and the results were very encouraging, these can be found at appendix one.

13 REVENUE BUDGETS

- 13.1 The table below shows how the Tourism Facilities performed overall with respect to financial management in the last financial year:

	EVIT	Underground Passages	Custom House Visitor Centre	Red Coat Guides
Budget (£)	126,480	83,480	5,470	6870
Actual Spend (£)	130,184	69,686	4,924	4454
% Variance	+5%	-17%	-10%	-35%

- 13.2 The only budget that was slightly overspent was that for the EVIT, however this was only marginal and the centre was operating on a much reduced budget compared to previous years, the main reason for the overspend being staffing costs involved in training a new member of staff and providing cover for long term sickness. All other facilities were on showed a Nett underspend for the year.

14. HOW DOES THE DECISION CONTRIBUTE TO THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN?

- 14.1 The Tourism facilities contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan by providing great things to do, see and visit. Emphasis is on quality and to enhance the City's cultural offering. As

well as providing top quality attractions the facilities help to promote what else is going on in the city from independent attractions to festivals and events

- 14.2 The Tourism facilities also support the local economy in assisting local businesses to run successfully, through promotion of attractions, places to stay and places to eat

15 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?

- 15.1 The facilities provide a service that meets the council's commitment to equality and diversity. Information and interpretation is available in different formats and languages. All of the centres are DDA compliant and the Red Coat Guides are able to amend their tour routes should any customers have mobility issues.
- 15.2 EVIT is involved in the Little Shoppers campaign to protect children that may be lost within the shopping centre.
- 15.3 All facilities are signed up to the 'Exeter Businesses against Crime' scheme and are in a position to report anything that may have an impact on the local environment and community safety

16. WHAT RISKS ARE THERE AND HOW CAN THEY BE REDUCED?

- 16.1 The main risk to the service is cost of provision; this report outlines the initiatives being pursued to control costs.

David Adcock – Visitor Facility Officer
David Lewis – Events, Facilities and Markets Manager

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

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

None

Contact for enquires: Democratic Services (Committees), Room 2.3, 01392 265275

Appendix One

Results from EVIT Visitor Satisfaction Surveys

	Excellent	Good	Neither	Poor	Very Poor
Accessibility & Sign posts	43%	7%	20%	15%	15%
Customer Service	80%	20%	0%	0%	0%
Goods & Services	41%	50%	9%	0%	0%
Overall Impression	62%	31%	7%	0%	0%
Range of Information	71%	29%	5%	0%	0%
Speed of Service	79%	21%	0%	0%	3%

Results based on a sample size of 15 surveys.

These results although from a relatively small sample size highlight that over 90% of respondents thought that in most aspects of service delivery the level was good or excellent. The VFO is aware of issues relating to signage, this will be reviewed in the autumn.

Results from the Underground Passages Visitor Satisfaction Surveys

	Excellent	Good	Neither	Poor	Very Poor
Accessibility & Sign posts	52%	44%	0%	4%	0%
Audio-visual presentation	61%	34%	2%	0%	0%
Customer service	73%	23%	0%	4%	0%
Interactive displays	46%	49%	5%	0%	0%
Interpretation displays	53%	46%	1%	0%	0%
Overall impression	74%	26%	0%	0%	0%
Speed of Service	70%	29%	1%	0%	0%
Tour Underground	78%	24%	2%	1%	0%

Results based on a sample size of 92 surveys.

These results highlight that over 90% of respondents thought that in all aspects of service delivery the level was good or excellent.

Results from Custom House Visitor Centre Visitor Satisfaction Surveys

	Excellent	Good	Neither	Poor	Very Poor
Accessibility & Sign posts	20%	60%	0%	20%	0%
Audio-visual presentation	20%	40%	40%	0%	0%
Customer service	75%	0%	25%	0%	0%
Goods & Services available	40%	40%	0%	20%	0%
Information available	40%	40%	20%	0%	0%
Interpretation displays	20%	60%	20%	0%	0%
Overall Impression	60%	20%	20%	0%	0%
Speed of Service	75%	0%	25%	0%	0%

Results based on a sample size of 5 surveys.

These results from an extremely small sample size creates an issue of gaining any meaningful insight. More effort needs to be made in getting customers to fill in visitor surveys

Results from Red Coat Guided Tours Visitor Satisfaction Surveys

	Excellent	Good	Neither	Poor	Very Poor
Content of Tour	68%	32%	0%	0%	0%
Customer service	74%	26%	0%	0%	0%
Delivery of Tour	62%	38%	0%	0%	0%

Overall impression	70%	30%	0%	0%	0%
Sign posting	68%	21%	5%	6%	0%
Variety of tours on offer	60%	40%	3%	0%	0%

These results are based on a sample of 52 questionnaires.

These results highlight that over 90% of respondents thought that in most aspects of service delivery the level was good or excellent. The VFO is aware of issues relating to signage, this will be reviewed in the autumn.