

Visitor Facilities Performance Review 2020/21

Relevant Officers:

David Lewis – Facilities and Markets Manager

Dave Adcock – Visitor Facilities Manager

Contact for general enquiries:

Jo Quinnell, Assistant Democratic Services Officer, Democratic Services, Room 4.36

Email: jo.quinnell@exeter.gov.uk. Tel: 01392 265197

1. What Is This Update About?

- 1.1 This report is to update Members on the performance of Exeter City Council's Visitor Facilities (Exeter Visitor Information & Tickets, Underground Passages, Custom House Visitor Centre & Red Coat Guided Tours) for the financial year from 1 April 2020 until 31 March 2021.
- 1.2 Due to the Covid-19 pandemic all facilities closed their doors to the public in mid- March 2020 and all staff except for the Visitor Facilities Manager were placed on the Job Retention Scheme in April 2020.
- 1.3 Following the lifting of lock downs and relaxations of some of the Coronavirus restrictions some of the Visitor Facilities were able to operate if only on a limited basis at periods throughout the 20/21 financial year
- 1.4 In order for the facilities to re-open it had to be demonstrated that they were safe to do so, with alterations made to the operations, a rigorous Covid-secure risk assessment, and a reduction in the level of service delivered.

2. Background

- 2.1 The visitor facilities are part of the Facilities & Markets section of the council. The section also encompasses the Matford Centre, Corn Exchange and markets. The visitor facilities are managed by the Visitor Facilities Manager reporting to the Facilities and Markets Manager (service lead).
- 2.2 In November 2020 Exeter City Council took the difficult decision to close Exeter Visitor Information & Tickets (EVIT). This was to meet some of the Council's financial savings target, and replicates decisions taken in other cities such as Bath and Oxford.

Officers are exploring alternative options to provide information services around the city, it is likely that information points will be installed at various locations. Visit Exeter are the main providers of tourist information in the city through the VE website. The ticket agency function of EVIT is being transferred to the new Exeter Corn Exchange office. This is a better location, and by using the Corn Exchange's box office system it is hoped that this activity will be increased.

The closure of EVIT has saved the council in excess of £100,000 a year.

3. What We Do

- 3.1 The 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. However, throughout the coronavirus pandemic the centre has been closed, and the staff placed on furlough. Despite relaxation to restrictions following various lockdowns, the environment at the Passages would make safe operation of the attraction very difficult to achieve. It is hoped that the facility will be able to re-open in the summer of 2021, depending on the developing situation with regard to the pandemic.

The Underground Passages are usually 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 at other times of the year. The centre is staffed by 4.2 full time equivalents. Health and safety at the Underground Passages is paramount and the current staffing levels ensure that the facility can operate safely. Currently some staff have been redeployed elsewhere within the visitor facilities operations, and others are now preparing the centre for re-opening

- 3.2 The Custom House Visitor Centre is an information and heritage centre situated on Exeter's historic quayside.

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. After the initial lockdown due to coronavirus, the centre re-opened on the 14 September, only to close again in November because of the second national lock down, to briefly re-open in December, but then was closed for the remainder of the financial year following the third lockdown in January.

ECQT were funding extended opening of the centre in the winter months to include both Thursday and Friday. Following a new service level agreement (SLA) between ECQT and ECC this arrangement will become permanent starting in the financial year 2021/22

The funding of the 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. The Trust provided around £50,000 per annum to run the centre in 2020/21.

Following the development of the new SLA and a change in the emphasis from ECQT in how the Custom House is to be used in the future, the level of grant is to be extended in 2021/22. The exact amount of grant is still to be determined and the financial year 2021/22 is being used as a baseline to establish the amount of funding that is required.

In July 2019 the first season of Quay Words took place, followed by an autumn/ winter programme. The event has been well received and has been successful. The initial project had been funded by ECQT. Subsequently Quay Words has been awarded two years of funding from Arts Council England to ensure the project continues until the winter of 2022. This project should develop into a key pillar of Exeter's designation as a UNESCO City of Literature.

The ambition of ECQT and ECC is to create a hub of activity at the Custom House, not just focussed on literature but also on a whole range of cultural activities. In January 2020 a report was commissioned to explore this intention. The outcome of which established a new role within ECQT of a cultural advisor and programme co-ordinator. Subsequently the trust appointed a second cultural partner, Honeyscribe, who are currently developing a month of cultural activities to be hosted at the centre for September 2021

3.3 The Red Coat Guided Tours service offers people the opportunity to join free walking tours.

The following is a summary of how the service would usually operate:

- Providing historic tours of Exeter operating every day of the year except Christmas Day and Boxing Day;
- Delivery by 31 volunteer red coat guides co-ordinated by the Visitor Facilities Manager;
- There is a summer programme of 29 tours a week (16 different tours) and a winter tour programme of 15 tours a week (10 different tours);
- Group tours are also organised, 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;
- A number of special tours are organised throughout the year, including Spooks & Broomsticks on Halloween, Heritage Open Days tours and Exeter Blitz tours (soon to become part of the regular programme).

The coronavirus pandemic severely disrupted the delivery of a guided tour service. Tours were suspended in March 2020. Tours did not re-start again until 19 October 2020 and ran until the end of December 2020, until the third national lockdown was enforced. In order to be compliant with the restrictions that were in place the way the service ran was changed. The mitigations included:

- A rigorous covid secure risk assessment was completed;
- Reduction of the number of tours operated. This was mainly due to the availability of guides as many were reluctant to carry out tours, not only because of their age demographic but also because many were in vulnerable groups;
- All tours had to be booked in advance, so that track and trace details could be collected. This was achieved with the support from the Corn Exchange staff through their Spektrix ticketing system;
- All tours were restricted to 6 people (including the guide), adhering to the rule of 6;
- No tours entered building;
- Suspension of the group booking service

4 How Did the Service Perform In 2020/21?

- 4.1 Exeter Visitor Information & Tickets closed to the public on 18 March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite not opening at all during 20/21. The net cost of maintaining EVIT, paying staff during the various lock downs and redundancy payments before was £130,000.
- 4.2 There were no visitors to the underground passages in 2020/21. The cost of maintaining the service was £94,000. This was an increase on previous years because of the lack of income earned.

The table below shows the performance of the Underground Passages over the previous five years:

UNDERGROUND PASSAGES					
	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Number of visitors hosted	21,183	22,824	21,772	21,862	20,206
Number of groups hosted	82	84	60	70	56
Total Income (£)	88,000	92,000	91,000	90,000	95,000
Total Expenditure (£)	144,000	157,000	155,000	161,000	171,000
Nett Cost of providing the service (£)	56,000	65,000	64,000	71,000	76,000
Cost per visitor	£2.64	£2.85	£2.94	£3.25	£3.76

NB: Expenditure and nett cost excludes depreciation and FRS costs

- 4.3 The Custom House has been operating as the visitor centre on the quayside since 2015 and this had seen a notable increase in the number of users. The pandemic limited the amount of time the centre was open to the public. In 2020/21 the centre was open for only 69 days and it that time attracted 1,113 visitors.

The Quay Words literature programme was gaining momentum after a good first year. With the onset of Covid most planned events were initially cancelled, however from July 2020 a series of on-line workshops and live streamed author events took place. It is hoped that a live audience can be welcomed back into the centre in 2021/22.

In 2020/21 the VFM worked with ECQT and its Cultural partners to develop the cultural and visitor experience with the centre. Below is an overview of the Custom House's performance over the previous five years:

CUSTOM HOUSE					
	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Number of visitors hosted	27,846	40,417	37,849	32,932	36,972
Number of groups hosted	145	160	78	98	169

NB: The cost of providing the Custom House is offset by a grant from EQCT

- 4.4 In 2020/21 the Red Coat guides were only able to offer tours on 74 days, over this period 118 people joined a tour. This is a lower take up than would normally be achieved. This was because to the restrictions in place, and the fact that the tours only ran in the autumn and winter when there would normally be a reduction in the numbers attending.

The cost of providing the service in 2020/21 was £18,000, during this period there was no income generated because the group tour service was suspended.

The table below shows how the service performed in the previous 5 years:

RED COAT GUIDED TOURS					
	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Number of visitors hosted	13,074	12,577	13,837	11,477	11,272
Number of groups hosted	145	157	173	141	117
Total Income (£)	8,000	7,000	10,000	9,000	8,500
Total Expenditure (£)	15,000	30,000	19,000	28,000	23,000
Nett Cost of providing the service (£)	8,000	23,000	9,000	19,000	14,500
Cost per visitor	61p	£1.83	65p	£1.66	£1.29

NB: Expenditure and nett cost excludes depreciation and FRS costs.

Since 2016/17 management costs are included in cost of running the service

4.5 Despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic last year saw the following developments within the Visitor Facilities service:

- Successful implementation of new working practices;
- TripAdvisor Travellers Choice Award for both the Red Coats & Underground Passages;
- Successful delivery of the Quay Words with on-line workshops and live streamed events;
- A successful Camera Obscura exhibition at the Custom House;
- Development of a ticketing/booking system for the Red Coat Guided tours;
- Successful delivery of the Heritage Open Day's programme in Exeter;
- Completion of a programme of building maintenance at the Custom House;
- Installation of a new heating control system at the Custom House;
- Development of environmental monitoring programme in the Custom House;
- Establishment of regular meetings with ECQT's cultural partners

5 Principle Objectives for the Next 12 Months

The main objectives for the service in 2021/22 are as follows:

- To safely re-open all facilities safely in light of Government guidance with respect to the Covid-19 pandemic, all of the following objectives are dependent on this being achieved;
- Continually look for ways to increase income and reduce costs at all the visitor facilities;
- Work with Literature Works, Honeyscribe and ECQT to further develop and facilitate the Quay Words project and other cultural projects at the Custom House;
- Assist with the development of the new Exeter Tickets box office at Exeter Corn Exchange;
- Develop retail operation at the visitor facilities;
- Explore the possibility of opening new sections of the underground passages for public access;
- Enhance the opportunities for events at the Quayside through obtaining a premises licence for the Custom House and Piazza Terracina;
- Work with Visit Exeter to raise the profile of the visitor facilities;
- Enhance social media output for all visitor facilities;

- Work with ECC's Arts & Event Lead to enhance Exeter's Heritage Open Days programme;
- Work with the Red Coat Guide Committee to develop the service including additional tours;
- Investigate identified alternative options for operation of the Underground Passages with the objective of delivering a financial saving;
- Deliver a training programme for new red coat guides;
- Create a new volunteer service for the Custom House;
- Review the staff roles at the Custom House.

David Lewis
Facilities & Markets Manager
July 2021