

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - ECONOMY

9 JUNE 2005

THE UNDERGROUND PASSAGES

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To report on the performance of the Underground Passages up until its temporary closure from April 2005.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Underground Passages transferred to the Economy and Tourism Unit in April 2000. It is a unique attraction, and the only such attraction open to the public in the country. The Underground Passages are also a scheduled monument, and this affects the operation as a tourist attraction.
- 2.2 Since April 2000 there have been a number of changes and improvements to the operation of the attraction, including extended opening times, new interpretation, new audiovisual presentation and equipment, special events, the introduction of IT facilities for the staff and a new “intrinsically safe” lighting system.
- 2.3 The Underground Passages were closed temporarily at the end of April 2005 owing to necessary health and safety precautions while the Princesshay development is progressed. The attraction will re-open in 2007 with a new heritage centre and improved facilities that will enhance the visitor experience and create the opportunity to increase the numbers of people able to visit it.

3. PERFORMANCE OF THE PASSAGES IN 2004/05

- 3.1 In the financial year 2004/05, the Underground Passages have achieved record levels of visitors and income as summarised below, compared with previous years since the Passages were transferred to the Economy and Tourism Unit.

Underground Passages Performance		
	Visitor numbers	Gross Income (£)
2004/05	18711	50,006
2003/04	16034	44,942
2002/03	14026	41,034
2001/02	15550	39,150
2000/01	14715	33,896

- 3.2 Visitor numbers to the Underground Passages have increased by nearly 17% in the last year and overall since 2000/01 by 27%, while income over the same period has increased by 47%.
- 3.3 The improved performance is due to a number of factors, including:
- extended opening
 - increased ticket prices
 - increased staffing levels
 - improved marketing and regular press releases
 - running of special events at different times throughout the year, such as witches and wizards' tours, Easter egg hunts, Heritage Open Days and Year Of the Artist.
 - membership of trade organisations
 - implementation of a group booking service within the Tourism Unit
 - improved facilities for the staff and visitors, including new interpretation, audio-visual presentations and equipment and a new lighting system.
- 3.4 The percentage increase in visitors to the Underground Passages is greater than the percent rise in visitors to Exeter. It demonstrates the importance of having a unique experience and the ability to cater for visitors all year round as well as the changing requirements of a typical visitor to the area.
- 3.5 Effort has been made to encourage local residents to the attraction. Although no precise figures are available, it is estimated that 40% are residents of Exeter or the local area. A recent special half-price offer attracted over 1400 local residents.
- 3.6 Following closure of the Underground Passages, the permanent staff have been temporarily redeployed with the Economy and Tourism Unit and the Archaeological Field Unit.

4 PROPOSAL

- 4.1 It is clear from the above that the Underground Passages are a popular tourist attraction and that there is potential for the business levels to be improved upon. Although the current closure is clearly unfortunate, the improvements to the facility arising from the Princesshay development do offer the opportunity to maximise its potential.
- 4.2 As part of the development the Passages will have a higher-profile entrance on Paris Street. Also a Section 106 agreement has been signed with the developers to provide a partially fitted out Heritage Centre to further enhance the visitor experience at the Passages. The City Council's capital budget already has an approved allocation of £135,000 towards the cost of fully fitting out the new facility. Detailed proposals are now being worked up and a final budget figure will be presented to members later this year.

- 4.3 There is a need to refresh much of the current presentation. There is a potential to enhance the experience of this part of the attraction with more interactive interpretation and with the use of new technologies, such as a virtual tour, and to give greater access by incorporating interpretation that is accessible to all, e.g. signage in Braille, larger print, foreign language guides. The new centre will be accessible to a greater range of people e.g. wheelchair users and the less mobile .

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The cost to the City Council of operating the Underground Passages in 2004/05 was £37,140.
- 5.2 In financial years 2005/06 and 2006/07, the cost net to the City Council of the Underground Passages service will be £61,330 and £62,630 respectively. This cost includes central overheads and costs of the staff redeployed within the Economy and Tourism Unit. There will be no income during the remainder of this period.

Cost codes	2005/06	2006/07
Staffing	£38,560	£38,560
General Operating costs	£13,670	£13670
Central Overheads	£10,400	£10400
Income	£1,300	£0
Total Cost	£61,330	£62,630

6 RECOMMENDED that

- (1) The performance of the Underground Passages in the financial year 2004/05 be noted.
- (2) A further report be submitted to members on the detailed fit out and operating proposals for the new facility.

Richard Ball
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ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT DIRECTORATE

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)
Background papers used in compiling this report:-
None