

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – RESOURCES 26 JANUARY 2011

**EXECUTIVE
8 FEBRUARY 2011**

LICENSING OF THE GUILDHALL FOR WEDDINGS AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To propose an application be submitted to Devon County Council for the Guildhall to be licensed for weddings and civil partnerships.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 For a number of years, any premise holder has been able to apply for their premises to be licensed by the local Registration Authority for the conduct of weddings and civil partnership ceremonies. There are some 16 approved premises within Exeter, which, in 2009, undertook 268 of the 610 ceremonies held in Exeter.
- 2.2 A fee is payable which, if the application is successful, then licenses the premises for three years. An inspection of the premises is undertaken by the County Registration Manager to ensure that it is appropriate and fitting for this use. Following this, the application has to be advertised in the local press during which time objections can be lodged on the grounds of unsuitability of the premises. If after a period of 21 days no objections are received, the premises are licensed for a period of three years.
- 2.3 As the Guildhall is such a unique building within the City, and already attracts a number of private bookings for dinners and receptions for which a fee is payable, it is considered likely that the Guildhall would be deemed suitable as a wedding venue, and would prove popular.

3. THE ISSUES

- 3.1 Due to an agreement between Devon County Council and this authority for the use of the Guildhall free of charge for three Citizenship Ceremonies per year, this Council would pay the costs associated with the necessary public notice (approximately £200) instead of the normal application fee of £2,000.
- 3.2 It is down to the licence holder to set the appropriate fee which hirers would pay for the use of their premises as the venue for their wedding or civil partnership. Research has been carried out locally to ascertain the fees charged in other City Centre venues, and it is proposed that a fee of £600 per wedding or civil partnership ceremony be charged. It is suggested that due to its uniqueness in the City, it will prove to be a popular venue which could generate in the region on 15 – 20 weddings per year, accruing £8,000 to £11,000 net income per annum after allowing for operational costs.

- 3.3 As part of the licence conditions, a 'responsible person' has to be on site for the hour before, and during, the wedding or civil partnership ceremony. It is suggested that the Senior Mace Sergeant be nominated as the responsible person, with all Guildhall staff as well as the Mayoral Support Officer and the Head of Corporate Customer Services, being also so designated.
- 3.4 Due to the popularity of the Guildhall for charity events and other private bookings, and so as to allow use of the Guildhall for such events to continue, it is proposed that in the first instance, weddings and civil partnerships only take place at the Guildhall on alternate Saturdays, with a maximum of 2 weddings or civil partnership ceremonies per day. For comparison, Larkbeare House which whilst only being offered on one Saturday per month, undertook 34 ceremonies in 2009. No ceremonies would be held on weekdays although it may be available for a Sunday or Bank Holiday hire subject to additional costs being covered.
- 3.5 The proposal of allowing the Guildhall to be used for weddings and civil partnerships will obviously have an impact on its availability for civic functions and other private hirings, particularly those which may need to be arranged at short notice. It is hoped that by suggesting the use of the Guildhall for ceremonies on alternate Saturdays, this will help alleviate this. Again, this will be reviewed after 12 months of operation.
- 3.6 The views of the Police and local Highway Authority have been sought with regards to access to the Guildhall for wedding vehicles. Neither have any objection to the proposal. However, the Traffic Regulation Order which restricts access to private vehicles to the High Street would need amending – this would cost approximately £1,000 due to the need for two public notices being published in a local newspaper. There is no budgetary provision for this. However, it is felt that the level of income which could be forthcoming will far exceed the one-off expenditure required to facilitate this.

4. THE PROPOSAL

- 4.1 It is proposed that an application to licence the Guildhall for weddings and civil partnership ceremonies be submitted to Devon County Council on the basis outlined in this report. The arrangement will be reviewed after 12 months of operation, and if no issues have been identified, the arrangement will continue for the duration of the initial licence (three years) when it will be reviewed again.

5. RECOMMENDED

- 5.1 That the Scrutiny Committee Resources supports and Executive approves the use of the Guildhall for weddings and civil partnerships along the lines detailed in this report.

HEAD OF CORPORATE CUSTOMER SERVICES

CORPORATE SERVICES DIRECTORATE