

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – RESOURCES

12 SEPTEMBER 2012

GUILDHALL MARRIAGES AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP CEREMONIES - UPDATE

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To update Members on the first 18 months' operation of The Guildhall being licensed to hold marriages and civil partnership ceremonies.
- 1.2 To inform Members of other collaborative arrangements entered into between Exeter City Council and The Devon Registration Service.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 At its meeting on 8 February 2011 the Executive gave approval for The Guildhall to be used for marriages and civil partnership ceremonies, and for the necessary application for the appropriate licence to be sought.
- 2.2 Devon County Council, as licensing authority, approved the appropriate licence in March 2011, with such a licence being valid for a three year period.
- 2.3 Devon County Council, this time in its capacity as Highway Authority, also relaxed the Traffic Regulation Order insofar as the area of the High Street between North Street and Queen Street, so as to allow a wedding vehicle to access The Guildhall area to drop off and pick up the wedding party.
- 2.4 With all of the necessary regulatory issues being in place, the availability of The Guildhall as a marriage and civil ceremony venue was publicised as widely as possible within the limited finances available. An open day was also arranged at The Guildhall.
- 2.5 To date, three ceremonies have taken place albeit the first was not until May 2012.
- 2.6 This is a little disappointing and below the anticipated numbers (and therefore under the expected income). An explanation for this is that ceremonies are, on the whole, planned and booked well in advance so bookings for a new venue are often lower than anticipated during the first 12 – 18 months. Enquiries for future ceremonies are being received although not yet materialising into confirmed bookings.
- 2.7 Further publicity, including a promotional wedding fayre in March 2013, will continue to promote The Guildhall as a marriage and civil partnership ceremony venue, with expectations that future bookings will be made and numbers will increase.
- 2.8 The agreement previously made with Devon Registration Service for it to use The Guildhall for regular Citizenship ceremonies is working well and much appreciated by all concerned.
- 2.9 Despite initial concerns regarding the impact that the Guildhall's use for ceremonies would have upon its many other uses, no issues have so far arisen.

3. FURTHER ISSUES

- 3.1 Members may be aware that Exeter's Registration Office, previously located in Castle Street, has closed.
- 3.2 As previously mentioned, marriages and civil partnership ceremonies tend to be booked well in advance, and in the case of Register Office ceremonies, this can be up to a year ahead. As the Castle Street premises closed in June 2012, bookings had already been taken for ceremonies for the remainder of 2012 and the early part of 2013. An alternative City Centre location for such ceremonies was therefore sought, with the Jury Room at The Guildhall being offered and accepted in exchange for an appropriate fee from the Devon Registration Service for each ceremony undertaken.
- 3.3 At the time of the writing of this report, approximately 10-12 ceremonies per week are being held in the Jury Room, which has, to date, brought in an excess of £2,000 of income to the City Council. It should be noted that little additional resources have been required for this to work, as staffing of The Guildhall was already necessary due to its existing opening arrangements.
- 3.4 If this level of ceremonies should continue, and current and future bookings indicate that it will, approximately £8,000 of income will be generated per annum, which is in line with the original estimation in February 2011. The Corporate Manager, Democratic & Civic Support has therefore agreed the continuation of this agreement.
- 3.5 At the same time as seeking an alternative venue for Register Office ceremonies, City Centre office accommodation for the Exeter Registration Office was being sought so as to ensure that a convenient service continued in Exeter for the registration of births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships.
- 3.6 Bearing in mind the Council's reducing workforce at the Civic Centre, and therefore decreased requirement for office accommodation, an agreement has been reached with the Devon Registration Service for it to lease some office space within the Customer Service Centre at the Civic Centre, for use by the staff of the Devon Registration Service. An appropriate rental agreement has been entered into.
- 3.7 Finally, the Bad Homburg and Rennes Committee Rooms at the Civic Centre have, at the expense of the Devon Registration Service, been licensed for the holding of marriage and civil partnership ceremonies, with them being available for use for ceremonies on a Saturday morning only. The first such ceremony took place in July, with a number more booked in over the coming months. Again, a fee for the use of these rooms has been agreed.
- 3.8 Legislation appertaining to the hours within which ceremonies can take place are being relaxed in the Autumn of 2012, with the possibility of ceremonies being available at any time of the day or night, seven days a week.
- 3.9 In response to a consultation exercise by the Devon Registration Service, the Corporate Manager, Democratic & Civic Support (who is responsible for the management of both the Civic Centre and The Guildhall) has responded that :-
- The Guildhall (both the main hall and the Jury Room) would be available for ceremonies between 8am and Midnight, 7 days a week (subject of course to availability);
 - The Committee Rooms at the Civic Centre would be available for ceremonies between 8am and Midnight on Saturdays and Sundays only

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1 The use of the Guildhall as a venue for marriage and civil partnership ceremonies, has not interrupted its use for civic functions, as was part of the consideration in 2011, and whilst the number of ceremonies has been lower than first anticipated, those ceremonies which have taken place have proved to be a success and have shown that The Guildhall is suitable for such a use.
- 4.2 This fact is reinforced by the extended use of the Jury Room by the Devon Registration Service which has led to an often unused part of The Guildhall now being used on a regular basis and has given rise to a small income stream.
- 4.3 Similarly, the location of the Exeter Registration Office in the Civic Centre, and its use of the Civic Centre's meeting rooms for ceremonies on a Saturday, has again ensured best use of available accommodation as well as collaborative working between the two authorities.

5. RECOMMENDED

- 5.1 That the Scrutiny Committee Resources:-
- notes the use of The Guildhall and Civic Centre for marriages and civil partnership ceremonies;
 - welcomes the collaborative arrangements entered into between Exeter City Council and The Devon Registration Service; and
 - notes the extended hours offered for the use of both The Guildhall and Committee Rooms at the Civic Centre for marriages and civil partnership ceremonies, once the necessary legislative changes have been implemented.

CORPORATE MANAGER, DEMOCRATIC & CIVIC SUPPORT

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling the report:

None