

Scrutiny Bulletin: July 2023

## Annual Performance Review - Visitor Facilities 2022/23

Relevant Officers:

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### 1 What is the update about?

- 1.1 This report is to update Members on the performance of Exeter City Council's Visitor Facilities (Underground Passages, Custom House Visitor Centre and Red Coat Guided Tours) for the financial year from 1 April 2022 until 31 March 2023.
- 1.2 Other than the Underground Passages, which re-opened to the public on the 9 June 2022, all other facilities operated for the full financial year.

### 2 Background

- 2.1 The Facilities and Markets Manager is the Service Lead with overall responsibility for the Visitor Facilities, as well as for Exeter Corn Exchange, Matford Centre and Markets.
- 2.2 The Visitor Facilities Manager is responsible for the management of the facilities.
- 2.3 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.
- 2.4 The Custom House Visitor Centre is an information centre, heritage centre and cultural hub situated on Exeter's historic quayside.
- 2.5 The Red Coat Guided Tours service offers people the opportunity to join free walking tours of the city.

### 3 Current position

- 3.1 The operation of the Underground Passages was examined under the Council's One Exeter transformation programme, which aimed to make better use of its skills and resources, enabling improved and efficient services, and delivering financial savings throughout the organisation. As a consequence, the facility's operating days and opening hours were reduced and the annual revenue budget was cut from £81,000 to £36,000. There were no redundancies involved because the staffing establishment had shrunk over the previous two years as employees had elected to retire or resign their posts. Two members of staff were retained on slightly fewer hours, and two other part-time posts were created.

The Underground Passages are now open four days a week (Thursday to Sunday). The facility has a permanent staffing establishment of two full time equivalents (FTE) supported by casual staff as required.

The facility re-opened to the public on 9 June 2022. The re-opening was delayed because of a water leak which had to be investigated thoroughly by South West Water.

The table below shows the performance of the Underground Passages over the last five operational years, the closure period (20/21 and 21/22) is omitted:

| <b>UNDERGROUND PASSAGES</b>                   |                |                |                |                |                |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|   | <b>2016/17</b> | <b>2017/18</b> | <b>2018/19</b> | <b>2019/20</b> | <b>2022/23</b> |
| Number of visitors hosted                     | 22,824         | 21,772         | 21,862         | 20,206         | 9,495          |
| Number of groups hosted                       | 84             | 60             | 70             | 56             | 16             |
| Total Income (£)                              | 92,000         | 91,000         | 90,000         | 95,000         | 61,000         |
| Total Expenditure (£)                         | 157,000        | 155,000        | 161,000        | 171,000        | 102,000        |
| <b>Nett Cost of providing the service (£)</b> | <b>65,000</b>  | <b>64,000</b>  | <b>71,000</b>  | <b>76,000</b>  | <b>41,000</b>  |

NB: Excludes depreciation and FRS costs

- 3.2 The Custom House opens seven days a week in the peak season (April - October) and Thursday to Sunday for the rest of the year. It is staffed by 0.9 FTE. The centre operated throughout the 22/23 financial year.

The centre is funded by an annual grant from Exeter Canal and Quay Trust (ECQT). The grant funding has been in place since 2008. The grant was amended in 22/23 following updates to the Service Level Agreement. These extended the winter opening pattern to four days a week, and provided additional staffing to ensure the centre does not close during lunch time as previously.

In 22/23 the Custom House continued to host two cultural partners, Quay Words and Honeyscribe. Throughout the year the Custom House was brought to life with various artist residencies, author events and workshops.

Both partners' original agreements came to an end in March 23. ECQT's ambition was to continue with two cultural partners for a further three years, matching their contracts with Arts Council England. Subsequently two partners were appointed, with Quay Words continuing for a further three years, and a new arts organisation, Art Work Exeter, being engaged. This has met ECQT's ambition to create a cultural hub within the Custom House.

The Custom House has been operating as the visitor centre on the quayside since 2015, when it replaced the previous visitor facility at Quay House, 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. The centre has been operating its regular opening pattern since 17 May 2021.

In 2022 Exeter Canal and Basin was awarded Heritage Harbour status, to celebrate this a Heritage Harbour Festival was organised, which took place in May 2023. A second Festival is being planned for September 2023

2022/23 also saw an increase in bookings for events in the Transit Shed and Piazza Terracina, for which the Custom House is responsible. A total of 91 events took place, ranging from Family activities, Jazz bands to Marathons and craft markets.

The table below shows the performance of the Custom House over the last five fully operational years (20/21 and 21/22 are omitted because they were affected by the pandemic) the number of visitors has not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels but are now starting to show a marked increase:

| <b>CUSTOM HOUSE</b>       |                |                |                |                |                |
|---------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                           | <b>2016/17</b> | <b>2017/18</b> | <b>2018/19</b> | <b>2019/20</b> | <b>2022/23</b> |
| Number of visitors hosted | 40,417         | 37,849         | 32,932         | 36,972         | 17,941         |
| Number of groups hosted   | 160            | 78             | 98             | 169            | 72             |

3.3 The Red Coat Guided Tours service returned to an almost pre-pandemic operation in 22/23, although the number of tours were reduced because some of the guides (many of whom are retired persons) were initially reluctant to lead them, and demand from the public decreased.

In summary the service operates by:

- 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 23 tours a week (12 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.

The tours operated for the entire year in 2022/23. The numbers of tours offered was reduced. However a full programme has now been operating since April 2023.

In 22/23 a total of 8,274 people joined a Red Coat tour.

The tour guide service generates an income by offering booked group tours. There was more demand for this service in 22/23, attracting 108 group booking comprising of 2,019 people and generating £7,500 of income.

Since 2022 the VFM has been assisted by the Corn Exchange's Events & Ticketing Administrator which has greatly helped in the delivery of the booked tour service.

The service worked in partnership with InExeter to develop the Green Quarter tour, these tours proved to be popular and successful and has since been included in the current tour programme, but renamed as the Markets, Merchants & Mariners tour

Other new tours were developed during the year, including Royalty in Exeter. The service has also offered tours to Ukrainian refugees

The table below shows the performance of the guided tours service over the last five fully operational years, 20/21 and 21/22 are omitted because they were affected by the pandemic:

| <b>RED COAT GUIDED TOURS</b>                  |                |                |                |                |                |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|   | <b>2016/17</b> | <b>2017/18</b> | <b>2018/19</b> | <b>2019/20</b> | <b>2022/23</b> |
| Number of visitors hosted                     | 12,577         | 13,837         | 11,477         | 11,272         | 8,274          |
| Number of groups hosted                       | 157            | 173            | 141            | 117            | 108            |
| Total Income (£)                              | 7,000          | 10,000         | 9,000          | 8,500          | 7,500          |
| Total Expenditure (£)                         | 30,000         | 19,000         | 28,000         | 23,000         | 31,000         |
| <b>Nett Cost of providing the service (£)</b> | <b>23,000</b>  | <b>9,000</b>   | <b>19,000</b>  | <b>14,500</b>  | <b>23,500</b>  |

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

3.4 The following developments within the Visitor Facilities service have been achieved:

- Recruitment and training new contracted and casual tour guides at the Underground Passages and Custom House;
- TripAdvisor Travellers Choice Award for the Red Coats;
- Successful delivery of three Quay Words seasons, focussing on the themes of Science, Maritime and Heritage. The events and workshops were all delivered in person;
- Successful delivery of three residencies with ECQT's cultural partner Honeyscribe;
- Successful recruitment of new cultural partner Art Work Exeter;
- Successful delivery of the Heritage Open Days programme in Exeter;
- Development of new red coat guided tours;
- Submission of 2 listed building consents for works to enhance the Custom House;
- Completion of a programme of building maintenance and decoration at the Custom House;
- Establishment of regular meetings of a Custom House working group whose aim is to develop ECQT's ambition to promote and enhance the Custom House as a cultural centre and its flagship building on the Quay ECQT's cultural partners;
- Repointing of sections of the Underground Passages including removal of the acrow props therefore improving the opportunity to offer special tours of the passages to areas where the public do not normally visit obstructions;
- Review of the current service level agreement with ECQT;
- Successful delivery of ECQT's Summer on the Quay programme.

## 4 Principal Objectives

The main objectives for the service in 2023/24 are as follows:

- 4.1 Introduce an on-line booking system for the Underground Passages;
- 4.2 Explore possibilities to introduce a website for the guided tour service and Underground Passages;
- 4.3 Continue to explore the possibility of opening new sections of the underground passages for public access;
- 4.4 Enhance social media output for all visitor facilities;
- 4.5 Work with Exeter Heritage Partnership and their volunteer co-ordinator to further develop volunteer roles within the Visitor Facilities;
- 4.6 Review the staff roles at the Custom House, and recruit to vacant positions;

4.7 Review the income and cost to ECC of the Underground Passages and if possible explore the opportunities of extending the opening times

## 5 Conclusion

All of the visitor facilities have come out of the pandemic successfully and now there are signs that business levels are gradually returning to pre-Covid levels.

David Lewis  
Facilities & Markets Manager  
July 2023