

Scrutiny Bulletin: July 2024

Annual Performance Review - Visitor Facilities 2023/24

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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 2023 until 31 March 2024.

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 financial year 23/24 was the first year since 19/20 that the Underground Passages were open for the full year. The performance of the attraction has been affected following a reduction of the opening times and staff levels as part of the Council's One Exeter transformation programme.

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.

During school holidays the attraction opens to the public on additional days to take advantage of the increased visitor numbers in the city, and increased demand from residents.

Income during the financial year was £97,000 which was 40% higher than the annual budget. The overall cost of providing the facility was £46,000 which was 16% lower than the budget.

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:

UNDERGROUND PASSAGES					
	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2022/23	2023/24
Number of visitors hosted	21,772	21,862	20,206	9,495	15,171
Number of groups hosted	60	70	56	16	23
Total Income (£)	91,000	90,000	95,000	61,000	97,000
Total Expenditure (£)	155,000	161,000	171,000	102,000	143,000
Nett Cost of providing the service (£)	64,000	71,000	76,000	41,000	46,000

NB: Excludes FRS adjustment. Income figures rounded.

- 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 Custom House has been operating as a visitor centre on the quayside since 2015, when it replaced the previous facility at Quay House, and this had seen a notable increase in the number of users.

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 covers the cost of running the centre. The provisional amount 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 23/24 it was budgeted that the cost of operating the Custom House would be £93,000, the actual cost was £83,000, saving the Trust £10,000 which has been rolled forward into the next financial year.

In 23/24 the Custom House continued to host two cultural partners. Each of these partners were awarded a 3-year contract to deliver events throughout the year matching their contracts with Arts Council England. The two partners that were appointed are Quay Words (continuing for a further three years) and a new arts organisation, Art Work Exeter. This has met ECQT's ambition to create a cultural hub within the Custom House. Throughout the year the Custom House was brought to life with various artist residencies, author events and workshops.

Following Exeter Canal and Basin being awarded Heritage Harbour status in 2022 a series of Heritage Harbour festivals have taken place, with the most recent one in June 2024 being very successful.

2023/24 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 85 events took place, ranging from family activities, jazz bands to Marathons and craft and food 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:

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2022/23	2023/24
Number of visitors hosted	37,849	32,932	36,972	17,941	21,955
Number of groups hosted	78	98	169	72	130

3.3 In 2023/4 the Red Coat Guided Tours service offered a full programme of tours for the first time since 2019/20.

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 with assistance from the Events & Ticketing Administrator (based at Exeter Corn Exchange).
- There is a summer programme of 29 tours a week (15 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.

In 23/24 a total of 10,648 people joined a Red Coat tour, a 29% increase on the number of people that attended tours in the previous year.

The tour guide service also generates an income by offering booked group tours and talks. The number of group bookings reduced slightly from 108 to 98. However, the total number of people taking tours (3,933) and the income earned (£10,500) represented a 95% and 40% increase respectively on the previous year.

The work of the Corn Exchange's Events & Ticketing Administrator has been invaluable in the operation of the booked tour service and also in delivering the Red Coat Guided Tour service.

The cost of providing the tour guides service in 23/24 was £12,000, this was 48% lower than the annual budget.

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:

RED COAT GUIDED TOURS					
	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2022/23	2023/24
Number of visitors hosted	13,837	11,477	11,272	8,274	10,648
Number of groups hosted	173	141	117	108	98
Total Income (£)	10,000	9,000	8,500	7,500	10,500
Total Expenditure (£)	19,000	28,000	23,000	31,000	22,500
Nett Cost of providing the service (£)	9,000	19,000	14,500	23,500	12,000

NB: Financial figures are rounded and exclude FRS adjustment.

3.4 The following were key developments within the Visitor Facilities service in 2023/24:

- Recruitment and training new casual tour guides at the Underground Passages and Visitor Centre Assistants at the Custom House.
- Introduction of a new on-line booking system for the Underground Passages.
- Premises licence obtained for the Custom House.
- TripAdvisor Travellers Choice Award for the Red Coats and Underground Passages.
- Successful delivery of three Quay Words seasons, focussing on the themes of Maritime, Nature and Heritage.
- Successful recruitment of new cultural partner Art Work Exeter.
- Art Week Exeter, ran a series of successful exhibitions and events, including the 'Legend of the Custom House', 'The Real Onedin Line' and 'The Exchange'.
- Successful delivery of the Heritage Open Days programme in Exeter.
- Introduction of new Red Coat Guides' public tour programme.
- Completion of a programme of building maintenance and decoration at the Custom House, including the installation of a new partition to improve fire safety, the re-pointing and re-decoration of the front exterior of the building.
- Work on the installation of a kitchenette/servery has commenced.
- Continued 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 Quayside.
- The staff roles at the Custom House have been reviewed to ensure that they are appropriate to meet the demands of the Service Level Agreement with ECQT.
- Review of the current service level agreement with ECQT.
- Successful delivery of ECQT's Summer on the Quay programme.
- Social media profile of all facilities has been improved.
- Extended opening times at the Underground Passages during peak times.

4 Principal Objectives

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

- 4.1 Ensure a smooth transition to the new management structure being implemented in autumn 2025 and find solutions to any issues it raises which affect the running of the facilities.
- 4.2 Recruitment of new contracted staff at both the Underground Passages & Custom House.
- 4.3 Recruit and train a new tranche of Red Coat Guides.

- 4.4 Continually look for ways to increase income and reduce costs at all the visitor facilities.
- 4.5 Implementation of repair works at the Passages with respect to the findings of the recent structural survey.
- 4.6 Work with ECQT and cultural partners to further develop Quay Words and other cultural projects at the Custom House.
- 4.7 Explore possibilities to introduce a website for the guided tour service and Underground Passages.
- 4.8 Continue to explore the possibility of opening new sections of the underground passages for public access.
- 4.9 Work with ECC's Arts & Event Lead to enhance Exeter's Heritage Open Days programme.
- 4.10 Work with Exeter Heritage Partnership and their volunteer co-ordinator to further develop volunteer roles within the Visitor Facilities.

5 Conclusion

The last financial year was the first full year (since the pandemic) in which all Visitor Facilities operated without any restrictions.

Overall, the work of the Visitor Facilities Manager and his team has resulted in a very successful year.

The cost of operating the Underground Passages and Red Coat Guides service were both considerably less than the annual budget.

The cost of operating the Custom House is underwritten by ECQT but the grant required in 23/24 was lower than expected.

All areas experienced increased activity levels and service improvements.

David Lewis
Facilities & Markets Manager
July 2024