

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Agenda Item No.

meeting date: 6 NOVEMBER 2012
title: PLATFORM GALLERY AND VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE REVIEW
submitted by: JOHN HEAP, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES
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1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide an update on the operation of the merged Platform Gallery with the Visitor Information Centre.
- 1.2 To consider proposals that would impact upon the current staffing expenditure associated with delivery of the joint service.
- 1.3 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:
 - **Community Objectives** – Under the People section of key priorities, the report contributes towards encouraging more involvement in community participation and, under the Prosperity priority, serves to help develop the tourism offer in the area.
 - **Corporate Priorities** - This report contributes to the priority of being a well-managed Council, providing efficient services based on identified customer needs. It also helps make peoples lives safer and healthier.
 - Other Considerations – None identified

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The combined Gallery and Visitor Information facility was officially opened on Saturday 5 May, following refurbishment work to facilitate joint service delivery.
- 2.2 A Business Plan was produced before the refurbishment work was undertaken, which steered the operation in the desired direction, and determined the basis for the current operational budget. Some of the proposals to help shape future operations, identified in the Business Plan, are considered as Issues in this report.

3 ISSUES

- 3.1 An evaluation of the performance over the five months since opening has revealed the following;-

The staff and customer feedback obtained through word of mouth, written customer comments has been overwhelmingly positive with regards to the refurbishment and alteration in configuration of the reception area. The only adverse comments received were in relation to the confusing signposting, which was not directing

people requiring Visitor Information to the new venue until the signs could be altered in coordination with Lancashire County Council.

- 3.2 Recording of visits to the Gallery and Information Centre (when located at the Council offices) has been undertaken through a manual head count. This method contains a degree of error, as might be expected, and a trip count has been fitted to the entrance of the Gallery/VIC from August this year. This method is considered to be more reliable, but it will take some time before a meaningful pattern of visits emerges.
- 3.3 However, the perception of all staff is that they are busier than they were when they operated separately, as was anticipated, and the visitor figures suggest that Saturday is consistently the busiest day. The other days of the week appear to vary, but there is no indication that a particular day is receiving more visits than any other. The staffing cover was arranged to enable a combination of presence, which included experience from both Gallery and VIC areas, and at a level that was anticipated to cope effectively with customers and the operational functions. There is one day during which there are two members of staff, rather than three, at all other times, and the provision of casual support on this day will improve the operation by providing designated time for the staff member with responsibility for administering stock and account management. The need for this staffing presence is especially necessary, as the co-ordination of the payments procedure under the current system is time consuming and necessitates working away from the disturbance of the front desk environment.

Recognising that the facility has identified a reduction in staffing expenditures as a combined operation, it is proposed to introduce a casual member of staff for one day a month, rather than weekly, and to monitor the situation alongside the aims, to improve the stock management system, and increase the involvement of existing staff in supporting the work of the Administration Officer. It may be necessary to increase the casual support on Fridays on one occasion per month in the future. There would be an additional cost of £470 per annum, if such changes were brought in.

- 3.4 As identified in the business plan, Sunday opening presents an opportunity to support visitor weekend enquiries, and increase retail sales. Clitheroe Chamber of Trade is seeking to promote more Sunday trade, and the Gallery experimented with Sunday opening during the summer holiday period from 5 August to 2 September (5 weeks). The attendances were similar each week, around seventy visitors each Sunday, apart from the Sunday of the bank holiday weekend, curiously, when only 15 visitors were recorded. These figures are considerably lower than the visits usually received on a Saturday (in excess of 150), but it was not extensively promoted due to the restricted time in executing the trial opening. Sunday opening is planned for the Christmas period, as is customary, but further experimentation is an option members may wish to consider. The level of income taken over the period 5th August to 2nd September (5 Sundays), averaged approximately £40. Members may wish to consider further Sunday opening. Opening every Sunday would mean the provision of 2 additional casual staff at a cost of £3,060. However, members should be mindful, that the initial changes were implemented against a backdrop of sizeable savings needed for the Council, and this change would be a further net cost to the Council.

- 3.5 Exhibition changeovers are especially demanding upon staffing workloads, and the programme is currently arranged around four different exhibitions per year. Given the need to arrange for a fast, but effective, changeover between exhibitions, there has always been additional working to the core hours, and this time has historically been recovered as lieu time. The Council's lieu time policy restricts the level of lieu time that can be accrued and taken over the course of the financial year. Whilst the exhibition changeover is taking place, there is also a need to maintain operational staff presence in continuing the visitor service. The supervision and set up of the exhibition transfer requires particular experience and skills currently held by the Gallery Coordinator now working as one of the two part-time Gallery/VIC Supervisors. Over time, subject to a managed in-house training programme, it is envisaged that the other Part-Time Supervisor will be in a position to undertake this function. It is anticipated that there will be a requirement for two members of staff to coordinate the transfer even when this training has been achieved.

Based upon a turnover time of two weeks between exhibitions, and two staff being required to oversee the transition, this equates to a further 37 hours paid work at Supervisor rate initially, for each of the occasions between exhibitions. The cost of 1 extra week Supervisor cover is £480 and there are up to 4 per year when this is required so the estimated cost at Supervisor rate is £1,920 for the year. However, it is expected that this will be reduced when the presence of two supervisors is not required.

- 3.6 There is a designated area for accommodating educational workshops and provides activities of interest to local schools. It is important that this function continues to be made available in delivery of a cultural experience for all users and generating income to support the facility. A list of room hire charges reflecting the nature of the hiring group and the duration of use, is available to cater for needs of local organisations.
- 3.7 The objective in merging the front of house functions so that staff multi-task in dealing with all enquiries, has not been achieved entirely at this stage, mainly because of the operational practicalities of conducting in-house training within restricted periods of overlap shift working. There is an identified need for more structured staff training and consistent sharing of tasks across all staff, in order to raise the efficiency and effectiveness of the service.
- 3.8 An aim of the joining up process was to join up the Gallery and VIC retail functions, and there has been some notable success in terms of the introduction of new lines of gifts/souvenirs produced by local artists/business. However, the administrative function in joining up the stock control, and the time-consuming administrative processes in relation to sales, has not improved.
- 3.9 Work has been undertaken with the accountancy team in order to help review procedures and avoid duplication. Whilst this has achieved some efficiencies, further work is needed. The ICT team is also working with the Gallery in order to help automate some processes. It is hoped that developments will be seen in the near future.

4 **RISK ASSESSMENT**

The approval of this report may have the following implications:

- Resources - The additional requests made within this report would fall outside the approved budget for the service, unless savings can be found elsewhere. The business plan for the service presented to Policy and Finance Committee in March 2012, identified potential savings of over £20,000 through the new service arrangements that were approved. These savings were to form part of the over £600,000 worth of savings that the Council needed in order to achieve a balanced budget.
- Technical, Environmental and Legal – None identified
- Political – None identified
- Reputation – The consistency of staffing presence and additional opening hours may serve to cover Sundays may enhance the reputation of the facility with visitors.
- Equality & Diversity – None identified

5 **RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE**

- 5.1 Agrees to the implementation of the additional casual staffing requirement on one day per week and to the cost of the cover for exhibition change over as identified in sections 3.3 and 3.5; provided that savings can be identified from within the operational budget for this financial year.
- 5.2 Considers the extension of Sunday opening to each week of the year, and decides whether further experimentation is necessary, so that the additional staffing costs at 3.4 can be considered in the budget process for next year 2013/14.

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Ref: CW/IW/Community Services 6.11.12

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