

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO COMMUNITY COMMITTEE

Agenda Item No.

meeting date: 11 MARCH 2014
title: PLATFORM GALLERY AND VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE REVIEW
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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 operational and administrative issues that have emerged and proposals to help alleviate the problems and help improve the delivery of the 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.
 - Other Considerations – None identified

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The combined Gallery and Visitor Information facility was officially opened on Saturday, 5 May 2012 following refurbishment work.
- 2.2 A Business Plan was produced to help steer the operation in the desired direction, and this 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 since the merging of the VIC into the Platform Gallery has revealed the following;-

The initial positive customer feedback obtained through word of mouth and written feedback received in the comments book, with regards to the refurbishment and alteration in configuration of the reception area, has continued to be favourable.

- 3.2 Visitors to the facility are recorded by an infra red triggered beam on entry and since this was installed when the Gallery was merged with the TIC a more accurate count of visitors is possible than was previously the case. Despite some teething problems and failure to collect figures over the last three months of 2013, it is now believed to be

operating effectively and the number of visitors to the facility has increased. In 2011 the visitor numbers recorded were 29,020; in 2012 - 38,634 and over only a 9 month period for last year 2013; 34,793 visitors were recorded.

3.3 Whilst the overall attendances have increased as might have been anticipated, there has not been an increase in income from commission-based sales. The income from items purchased for resale has remained similar to the previous year, and there has been a marked reduction in income generated from items that are sold on a commission basis, and which comprise the stock on a sale or return basis. Up to the end of February this year, the figure was £6,850 less than the budget estimate.

3.4 There may be various reasons in accounting for this;

- The introduction of the Visitor Information service has served to attract an increase in numbers to the site as they benefit from the supply of tourism orientated information, but this has affected its appeal as a facility dedicated to providing an original quality art and craft experience. The entrance area creates a favourable impression, particularly for the visitor seeking information about the Ribble Valley with maps, books, and souvenir lines, and to appreciate the creative offer, visitors must be inclined to explore further through the building, and be inquisitive enough to experience more than what was perhaps the main purpose of their visit. The exhibition and facility experience can extend into the workshop/education area at the far end of the facility, and there is scope to generate more curiosity in visitors through the application of more persuasive promotional methods.
- The selection and/or quality of crafts on display for sale are not as appealing as they were. As the majority of suppliers have remained the same from when the Gallery was a single operation, this seems unlikely.
- The emphasis relating to service delivery has changed reflecting the amalgamation of two discrete facility functions and objectives, and the relative strengths and weaknesses of the staff. There was previously one full time member of staff who planned the shop and exhibitions in a particular style. There are now two part-time supervisors, who are aiming to deliver an operation that meets the objectives of differing clientele needs. The respective backgrounds of the staff are different and will inevitably take time to learn elements of the other's experience.

3.5 Whatever factors have shaped the operation over the first two years of the merged arrangement, it is now considered to be an appropriate time to address some issues, which will help crystallise the focus and purpose of the facility.

3.6 Operational cover – when the two facilities were merged, the combined staff costs were reduced, based on the assumption that it must be possible to derive some economies of scale. Staffing rotas were devised in consultation with staff, and since we have had the chance to monitor those arrangements over a full year, certain operational factors have arisen with the current shift cover arrangements;

The staggered nature of two people at the beginning and end of the day has proved problematic when one of the staff is absent for any reason. As a second person is required to cash up at the end of the day, and ideally two people at the start of the

day, in line with meeting satisfying normal operating financial procedures, special cover arrangements are implemented.

- 3.7 On Friday, there are just two staff in place, as opposed to three at all other times. This arrangement was not set up to reflect lower levels of visitors or customer sales, and in fact the monitoring of visitor numbers would indicate this day is just as busy as any other time. The supervisor does not have as much opportunity to undertake business/exhibition work when there are only two people in attendance.
- 3.8 In response to these issues, and on reviewing the operation since the merger of the two service areas, there are courses of action which are believed to be beneficial to service delivery.
- 3.9 The opening time to be changed, to commence at 10am every morning, rather than 9am on weekdays. This enables a staff cover structure, which has three staff in attendance at any one time. The first hour is generally the least busy period of the day and this measure is not likely to significantly reduce income from sales.
- 3.10 Casual cover will be arranged to support the current two staff on Fridays so that there are three staff at any time during all opening hours of the facility.
- 3.11 It has also emerged that there is a considerable degree of time-consuming administration work, which is constraining efforts to focus on the visitor and improving the visitor experience.
- 3.12 The number of artists supplying products for sale on commission is to be reduced from the current level of approximately 125 down to 25 for the majority of the year. Those artists who have proved the most successful across the range of crafts suited for display are to be invited to provide a greater range of work in replacing the items that are being returned to those artists whose work is being returned. The number of artists supplying arts and crafts for the very popular Christmas exhibition will be increased just for that three month period to enhance the shop offer and maximise sales.
- 3.13 The number of lines being carried within bought stock is to be reduced from approximately 160 down to 100 initially, and even further as the value of carrying certain merchandise on site continues to be scrutinised. Stock items being carried that either sell slowly, are perishable, have a short shelf life, and represent a risk of going out of date, will not be replaced.
- 3.14 These measures will serve to reduce the administration burden considerably, as the tracking of artist sales and stock control is time consuming, supported by labour intensive procedures. By reducing the time allocated to administration, more can be attributed to customer support through direct on site assistance and project work to enhance the visitor offer and increase the promotion and marketing of the facility. This will also allow more time to focus upon building up the use of the facility for hire and educational purposes.
- 3.15 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. To demonstrate the uptake by the community, the use of this area over the area over a 12 month period for 2014; is shown below;-

- January 11 - The launch of Maison Thè - the pop up café is coming to the Platform Gallery.
- January 31 - February 22 - Glen Purchase, Ribble Valley Open Prize-winner 2013. Each year the Clitheroe Castle Museum host a Ribble Valley Open Exhibition, displaying selected artwork inspired by the Ribble Valley.
- March 1 - Workshop with Priscilla Jones, Mark-making and Mixed Media and drawings. The aim of the workshop is to explore and experiment using mark making techniques so you can be playful, free up your drawing skills, push the boundaries and beyond.
- 29 March - Maison Thè - a Mother's Day themed pop up café.
- March 31 – April 5 - Pendle Pottery, selected work produced by members of the Simonstone pottery group Pendle Pottery.
- April 7 – 17 - Beauty Is The First Test Schools Exhibition. Salesbury and Sabden primary schools display their artwork produced with a local artist at the gallery in the theme of the exhibition, "How maths is used in crafts".
- April 19 - Maison Thè - an Easter themed pop up café.
- May 3 – 31 - Craft Open 2013 Winners. Each year the Platform Gallery host the Craft Open exhibition, displaying selected makers from the north of England. Awards were given to three makers. As part of their prize they won the opportunity to have an exhibition in the gallery.
- Jun 9 – 14 - St Mary's College, Blackburn, display of the sixth form pupils A level artwork.
- June 16 – July 12 - Young Peoples Craft Open. Craftmakers aged 16 – 25 from across the North of England are invited to apply to be considered for selection. The selected makers showcase the up and coming talent from the region. Furniture, textiles, jewellery, ceramics, glass and mixed media work hang side by side in this celebration of the hand-made.
- July 26 - Maison Thè - themed pop up café.
- August 9 - Clitheroe Food Festival / Cake design competition with Maison Thè.
- August 30 - Maison Thè pop up café.
- September 6 - Art Workshop with artist Robert Dutton.
- September 8 – 20 - Community exhibition in the theme of the late summer show "Crafts For the Home".
- October 24 – 25 - Artist Group Exhibition with Sam Taylor.
- October 27 – November 8 - Ten Plus Textiles – Contemporary textiles work by members of the North West textile group, Ten Plus.
- November 21 - 22 – Metal/wirework jewellery exhibition. Lancashire jeweller Sam Taylor, exhibition and demonstrations.
- November 29 - Maison Thè pop up café.
- December 5 - 21 - Christmas Craft Stalls Week 1,2 and 3.

3.16 Sunday opening has taken place historically at the Gallery during December, and this has proved worthwhile in generating sales at what is the busiest time of year in the run up to Christmas. From examination of the income figures, it would appear that the last two Sundays prior to Christmas are the most likely to generate the greatest sales.

3.17 The Gallery experimented with Sunday opening during the summer holiday period in 2012 from 5 August to 2 September (5 weeks). The attendances were similar each week, around 70 visitors, 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). From the experimental opening on Sundays, there is no evidence in terms of visits or income generation to suggest that Sunday opening is financially worthwhile. However, this is not to say that it may be

worth re-visiting, if a stronger Sunday offer becomes possible. Joining up of the popular tourist destinations;- Museum/Castle, Leisure Facilities, Cafés open on a Sunday, for example, may appeal to the visitor over the summer months and help to stimulate and enhance visits to Clitheroe.

- 3.18 There is no budget provision to accommodate Sunday opening and, on the days when it has been opened, casual staff have covered the opening hours. A more satisfactory arrangement would be for a permanent staff member to work on a Sunday as they have key holder responsibilities for the site, and have a greater understanding of the operation than casual staff. If members considered experimenting with another trial of Sunday opening during the Summer holiday period, or at any other period, additional staffing expenditure would be necessary.

4 **RISK ASSESSMENT**

The approval of this report may have the following implications:

- **Resources** – There are cost implications to the issues identified in Section 3

The additional cost of providing casual cover on Fridays will be met without increasing the Temporary Staffing budget. It is proposed to introduce a revised operational cover procedure to reduce the need for casual cover at times of holiday and sickness. The facility can operate with two staff in attendance under normal circumstances, so casual cover will not be necessary if a staff member is absent and holidays will be planned to avoid two members of staff being absent at any one period. The temporary cover is being directed to Friday shifts, whilst a reduction is realised from savings in not engaging temporary cover at other times; unless critical. If this proves successful, a decision as to whether the Friday shift becomes part of the structured shift pattern may be considered. The overall control on casual cover is expected to fall within the expenditure allocation of £8176 for 2014/15.

There are no costs attached to implementation of the changes to handling and administering the stock.

- **Technical, Environmental and Legal** – No implications identified.
- Political – No implications identified.
- **Reputation** – The consistency of staffing presence and implementation of measures identified in this report may contribute to improved customer service continuity at this facility.
- Equality & Diversity – No implications identified

5 **RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE**

- 5.1 Considers the operational measures identified at 3.9 and 3.10 and agree to their implementation with the change in opening hours commencing from 1 April 2014.
- 5.2 Considers whether to carry out a further trial of Sunday opening this summer, in light of least year's evidence.

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