

# RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL REPORT TO COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Agenda Item No.

meeting date: 27 May 2014  
title: UPDATE ON MERGED PLATFORM GALLERY AND VISITOR INFORMATION CENTRE  
submitted by: JOHN HEAP, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY SERVICES  
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## 1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To update Committee on the performance of the Platform Gallery.
- 1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:
  - **Community Objectives** – in contributing to make lives safer and healthier. The importance of creative activity to mental health is well documented, and there is believed to be a positive association between culture, the arts, and social inclusion for people with mental health problems. Cultural attendance is believed to provide a stimulus to people that has an impact on their well-being.
  - **Corporate Priorities** – to ensure a well-managed council, providing efficient services through identifying customer need and maximising use of resources.
  - Other Considerations – none identified.

## 2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Visitor Information Centre was relocated to the Platform Gallery following refurbishment of the facility in March/April 2012. The combined service opened to members of the public on Saturday 5 May 2012.
- 2.2 The challenge for the combined service was to create a new experience which added value to customers visiting as a result of combining the VIC with the arts and crafts of the gallery.
- 2.3 The facility now has a wider visitor offer comprising; a variety of visitor information items covering the immediate area and further afield, to assist local residents and tourists as well as helping to grow the visitor economy in the valley. A high quality range of stock; jewellery, ceramics, fabrics/materials, artwork, and original exhibitions, and there is also an educational programme with workshops for school children and adults wishing to acquire different skills. This latter area is one where particular attention will be given to broaden the range and scope of the existing programme.

## 3 ISSUES

- 3.1 The number of visitors to the site has increased in the past few years. In 2011, the estimated number through a manual counter was 29,020. In 2012, when an automatic electronic count was introduced, this increased to 38,634, and, during an eight month period of 2013, a total of 34,328 visits were recorded. The counter mechanism was not in operation for one third of the year, so the predicted estimated visits are likely to have been in excess of 46,000 for the year.
- 3.2 There has been a concerted approach to reduce the amount of stock and lines held on site to simplify both stock management and to prioritise the sale of items that are made in the Ribble Valley. There has also been a reduction in the number of artists supplying stock, so for three quarters of the year there are no

more than twenty five selected artists. This enables more items to be carried from the more popular selling artists. In the run up to Christmas a larger range of suppliers are accommodated to meet the customary increase in demand.

There have been positive indications that this action may be leading to an increase in sales. A comparison of all income received from weekly sales over the past three years at the time of the exhibition change over the end of April beginning of May 2014 reveals a higher level this year than in previous years

3.3 The recent recommendations made by internal audit to improve stock control have been implemented. Whilst these improvements serve to strengthen efficiency, they also assist in staff to control the resale element of the service more closely to help ensure the best possible returns for resale and commission based sales. The Action Plan includes;

- Monthly stock takes of both bought and artists stock.
- Running down of bought stock lines
- The amount of stock within the lines carried being kept to a minimum.
- Reduction in the number of artists with work being held on site at any time
- Centralisation of stock storage
- No perishable items are now carried.

A follow up audit is understood to be taking place shortly and it is expected to be able to demonstrate implementation of all the recommendations.

3.4 The educational space at the far end from reception area is utilised extensively for bookings. The programme for this year was reported to committee in March and there have been additional sessions now scheduled; including a special event to help attract visitors to the site which has internally organised by staff, and also hire of the area by Clitheroe company Tile Productions to deliver a ceramics workshop, and a pewter artist, who is delivering a one day workshop for the public.

3.5 Discussions with the Chamber of Trade about Sunday opening in the town have been ongoing. There a number of shops, cafes and food outlets open on a Sunday now, and the general offer for locals and visitors has improved over the year. Members expressed a wish for the Gallery to trial Sunday opening to help in increasing the offer to the visitor economy. The cost of doing so would be £173 per Sunday; (based upon staff working at the normal non enhanced rate), and energy costs in association with running the building for 6 hours. As the Gallery is normally closed on a Sunday, the cost is not accounted for within the current budget.

3.6 It is acknowledged that the opening of the Gallery will not make the single difference as far as the volume of people in the town are concerned on a Sunday. However, the more businesses that are open, the greater the likelihood of people coming into town, especially if this is combined for visitors to the area, with the overall range of things to do and see in the Ribble Valley. This strategic approach to the visitor economy will help build the tourism offer in partnership with the businesses who operate in this area of the economy.

3.7 It is 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Gallery being open to the public this year, and, as a way of commemorating this occasion, a promotional event incorporating participation in free workshops suitable for adults and children is being organised on Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> May 2014. Instructors experienced in Jewellery making and weaving for adults, and origami and print making for children, will be on site at intervals throughout the day for people to just 'pop-in' and give it a try.

#### 4 **RISK ASSESSMENT**

The approval of this report may have the following implications

- **Resources** – There are no financial implications as a result of this report but the overall adoption of the operational efficiencies should contribute to ensuring the facility operates within the allocated budget.
- **Technical, Environmental, Legal** – None identified
- **Political** – None identified
- **Reputation, Equality & Diversity** – A very favourable reputation has been developed over the twenty years that the facility has been available to members of the public. The implementation of efficient operational systems and procedures, including stringent adherence to stock management across the joint service, will serve to protect this reputation.

#### 5 **CONCLUSION**

Committee will be kept informed of any issues relating to ongoing performance and the outcome of the follow up audit when undertaken.

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Community Services Committee 27.5.14 Colin Winterbottom /IW