

ADULTS AND COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
19 JANUARY 2016

DONINGTON LE HEATH MANOR HOUSE
CHARGING AND OPENING HOURS STRATEGY

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ADULTS AND COMMUNITIES

Purpose of Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to appraise Members of the Adults and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on improvements completed at Donington le Heath Manor House (DLH), to the visitor offer and the building's energy efficiency and to propose changes to charging and opening hours.
- 2 The Committee is asked to consider and comment on the principle of the introduction of an admission charge and amendments to opening hours, as part of a more cost effective and sustainable operational model for DLH.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

- 3 DLH has seen a decline in visitor numbers in recent years, falling from 13,069 in 2013-14 to 8,323 in 2014-15. This followed a decline in 2011-12, which saw numbers drop from 25,400. The need to increase visitor numbers is a priority.
- 4 The preferred charging strategy would support a more cost effective and sustainable operating model and maximise income streams.
- 5 The proposed amended opening hours have been informed by the consultation responses. They would still allow for schools and other groups to visit outside of these hours and other events could be held outside of the main opening season.
- 6 The County Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) was approved on 19 February 2014. It identified a reduction in funding for community museums, totalling £135,000 by 2018-19.
- 7 On the 11 December 2015, the Cabinet noted the improvements made to the visitor offer and investments in energy efficiency measures and approved in principle preferred charging strategy and preferred opening hours for DLH, subject to consideration by the Adults and Communities Scrutiny Committee. Should the Committee raise concerns regarding the proposals a further report will be submitted to the Cabinet in February 2016.

Background

- 8 DLH is a unique property located in North West Leicestershire, a few miles south of Coalville. It is amongst the oldest houses in the County and is the best preserved medieval house in the area. The only other regularly publically accessible historical

house in Leicestershire is the recently opened National Trust property at Stoneywell, Ulverscroft.

- 9 DLH dates to the 13th Century and was significantly remodelled in the early 17th Century. It provides opportunities to tell multiple stories and its links to Sir Everard Digby, who was involved in the gunpowder plot, is part of the reason for the 1620's being identified as a key period in DLH's history on which the re-interpretation of DHL has been focused.
- 10 DLH benefits from a supportive and well established Friends Group (The Friends of DHL Manor House) who volunteer valuable skills and time to various projects, in particular the maintenance of the gardens. They also organise a series of fundraising events and activities, with the income being used to support specific projects at DLH. The Friends of DLH Manor House are clear that they wish to continue to support the operation of DLH, but do not see themselves as a management or delivery group.
- 11 Following the MTFs requirements agreed in February 2014, the service undertook an options appraisal to examine how the Council could reduce its ongoing subsidy for the museum. This work highlighted the following key issues:
 - Visitor numbers were declining, falling from 13,069 in 2013-14 to 8,323 in 2014-15;
 - The energy costs formed a significant proportion of the total operational costs of the building;
 - Visitor feedback showed that whilst many visitors enjoyed their visit they were unclear what story DLH sought to tell;
 - Schools visits experienced a significant decline, following the revision of the Primary Curriculum in 2014.
- 12 DLH has been a free entry site, although from 2012 an admission charge for special events was introduced. The level of charges ranged from £3 to £15.00 depending on the nature of the event. Events included historical talks, craft workshops, concerts and theatre performances.
- 13 DLH has operated a popular tearoom facility from the Barn; a building within the grounds. Following the withdrawal of the commercial operator in 2013, this facility was delivered using catering staff and resources based at the Snibston Discovery Museum. Following the closure of Snibston in July 2015, it was necessary to find an alternative means of supporting a catering offer going forward. Therefore the catering arrangements will be run in-house and reviewed at the end of first year. These costs are reflected in the budget as outlined in paragraphs **38** and **39**.
- 14 In order to address the decline in visitor numbers it was necessary to undertake a holistic review of the DLH offer. This included understanding the needs and visiting patterns of current and potential visitors, understanding which interpretation types and themes would have the greatest appeal and understanding the potential for generating additional income.
- 15 Over the 2015-16 season, the Service has worked to re-interpret the house from a partially-furnished building, with temporary and permanent display galleries, representing multiple periods of history, to a fully furnished period home of the 1620s, containing layers of interpretation throughout. Wakefield Council has freely transferred several items of high quality replica furniture and fittings, formerly used at

Clarke Hall, which is of the correct period and style. A floor plan and a series of illustrations of what the final offer will look like is attached to this report marked Appendix 'A'.

- 16 Access to the public during the 2015-16 season has been restricted in order to facilitate the energy and lighting improvements and also enable the re-interpretation work to take place. The small nature of the individual spaces within DLH meant that it would be difficult to retain safe and public access whilst such work was ongoing. Access for pre-booked groups, including schools, was retained and a number of special events were put on throughout the season and this period was used as an opportunity to consult with the public on the new proposals and re-interpretation work.
- 17 Another principal change in the offer at DLH is to move the admission point from inside the house to the point where visitors enter the gardens, reinforcing the concept of a single attraction of the house and gardens. To facilitate this, the construction of a small timber framed structure, where staff/volunteers can greet visitors, receive admissions, issue tickets and provide initial information to the visitors, will be required. This would require planning permission.
- 18 The new offer encourages greater community involvement with the house and gardens and creates more opportunities for volunteers and engaging people from a wide range of backgrounds and interests.
- 19 Subject to the Committee's approval of the proposals, it is intended that DLH will re-open to the public in May 2016, with marketing and promotion of the new offer, including the launch of a new website, commencing in early 2016.

Consultation

- 20 Between June and September 2015 the Service undertook a series of consultation events with users and stakeholders on the proposed 1620's house and garden concept, which also included questions in relation to admission charges and visiting periods. Covering all elements in this way allowed the Service to finalise the interpretative approach based on user feedback, understand when visitors most wanted access to DLH, and test the response to a proposed admission charge.
- 21 The consultation programme included local residents, visitors/users and key stakeholders, including Friends groups and the Hugglescote and Donington Le Heath Parish Council. A copy of the consultation programme and the questionnaire used are attached to the report marked Appendix 'B' and 'C'.
- 22 The decline in school visits to DLH mirrors the picture across the museum sector and is a result of the major changes in the National Curriculum announced in 2014. The move to a chronological approach to the teaching of history means that the Victorians and Tudors, popular workshops for Primary schools, are topics no longer addressed within the Primary curriculum. Tudor workshops were popular at DLH and attracted schools from across the county and further afield; however, a change in focus is now required. Local history has been enhanced within the Primary curriculum and therefore presents opportunities for a new range of workshops. The new interpretative approach at DLH will support these by focussing on local people and stories. A separate consultation was undertaken with schools and the questionnaire sent out to all Leicester and Leicestershire schools and those out of County schools

that had previously visited DLH is attached to the report marked Appendix 'D'. The response rate to this questionnaire was low and further consultation will be required as new offers are developed.

Feedback from the Consultation

- 23 The results of the consultation were very supportive of the 1620s house and gardens concept and the idea of a fully furnished house had strong appeal. The feedback also indicated that the gardens were a popular part of the overall offer. A summary of the feedback is attached as Appendix E.
- 24 Responses highlighted that the provision of a good quality tearoom/catering offer was a key factor in people's decision to visit. A number of consultees indicated that without some form of catering provision, such as hot drinks and cake, they would choose not to visit.
- 25 The feedback indicated that the majority of respondents were not opposed to the idea of an admission charge, although local residents indicated that having to pay each time they visited would dissuade them from visiting on a regular basis.
- 26 The consultation also showed that most visitors would expect DLH to be open between April and the end of September, with the most popular days being Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday. There are some similarities in this opening pattern to similar National Trust properties.
- 27 Schools indicated that they would be most likely to visit mid-week for a full day visit. Responses were only received from primary schools, all of whom indicated that they would be most likely to visit DLH for the history curriculum, but showed an interest in wider subjects and cross-curricula areas. Also of key importance for schools was the provision of coach parking, toilets and onsite facilities for eating lunch.
- 28 The local member, Dr Terri Eynon CC, is positive about the development and is keen to see DLH develop closer links with the local community, as well as seeing the development encourage more visitors to DLH and the local area.

Other Research

- 29 In addition to the direct consultation feedback, desk top research looking at the charging policies of similar types of attraction and other local attractions was undertaken. This was used to inform the proposed charging strategy, which is attached to the report marked Appendix 'F'.
- 30 Feedback from the Friends of DLH Manor House and Friends of Leicester and Leicestershire Museums have been very supportive of the proposals. Both Friends groups are encouraged by the project and the Friends of DLH Manor House are working closely with the Service to develop a new volunteering offer, which will provide volunteer house and garden guides to enhance the visitor offer; this is in specific response to consultation feedback.

Proposed Admission Charges

- 31 It is proposed to introduce an admission charge from April 2016, as detailed in the charging strategy attached (Appendix 'F'). The forecast projects annual revenue of

circa £30,000, as part of the revenue budget for DLH. The proposals recommend a standard adult admission charge of £5.95; concession (Senior, Student, Disabled/Special Needs) at £5.00 and children at £3.50. There would be a discounting strategy for families, and children under 3 and carers would be free. A separate charging strategy for schools and organised groups would be applied, and this would be dependent on the nature of the visit or hire.

- 32 In addition, it is proposed that anyone purchasing admission would be entitled to free return visits that season. It is expected, based on consultation results, that this measure would encourage repeat visits throughout the season by local residents.

Proposed Opening Hours

- 33 The new proposed opening season will run from the start of April to the end of September. The current seasonal opening arrangements run from mid-February to mid-December. DLH would be open from Thursday to Sunday inclusive, from 10.30 am to 4.30 pm. Current arrangements are Wednesday to Sunday 11.00 am to 4.00 pm. Schools and groups will be able to book visits outside of these dates and times by prior arrangement. It will also be possible to hold special events outside of the main opening season when relevant and in response to specific opportunities; for example, events in November as part of DLH's Guy Fawkes connections.

Conclusions

- 34 The work to improve the energy efficiency of DLH has already resulted in lower energy consumption levels, although it is too early to demonstrate robustly how this will translate into ongoing savings. Usage patterns will be monitored to ensure the new system is used as effectively as possible, so that the optimum reductions are achieved.
- 35 The creation of the 1620's house and gardens will provide a more coherent and attractive offer for visitors, which is expected to reverse the decline in visitor numbers. This, coupled with the introduction of a realistic charging strategy, is expected to improve income and lead to a reduction in the overall subsidy for the DLH. As indicated in paragraph 39, it is expected that by year two the site will make an annual contribution of £2,500 to the Adults and Communities budget, instead of requiring £30,000 per annum subsidy.
- 36 The Service is confident that with the ongoing support of the Friends of DLH Manor House and improved links with the local community, as a result of this project, DLH will be in a strong position moving forward, having created a more sustainable and cost effective operating model, which can continue to develop in future years.

Background Papers

- Report to the Cabinet: 11 December 2015 – Donington Le Heath Manor House Charging and Opening Hours Strategy <http://ow.ly/WNbaO> ;
- Report of the Cabinet to the County Council meeting, 19 February 2014 - Medium Term Financial Strategy 2014/15 to 2017/18 - <http://ow.ly/JmQUZ>

Resources Implications

- 37 A capital reserve of £41,900, ringfenced for improvements to DLH, has been used to provide the bulk of investment for this project. In addition to this, the Friends of Donington le Heath Manor House have contributed £5,000 of their own funds to support the project. The balance of costs, amounting to £20,000, will be funded from within the Department's budget.
- 38 The intention of the new offer is to create a more cost effective operating model for DLH, thereby reducing the Council's ongoing financial contribution and contributing towards the MTFs savings for the Department. The existing budget for DLH is £30,000 per annum.
- 39 In year one of operation, the new offer has a budget model of £12,385 and by year two, following initial set up costs for the kitchen, it is projected that DLH will make a contribution of £2,615 per annum towards the Adults and Communities budget.
- 40 The Director of Corporate Resources and the County Solicitor have been consulted on the content of this report.

Timetable for Decisions

- 41 Should the Committee raise concerns regarding the proposals a further report will be submitted to the Cabinet in February 2016.
- 42 Subject to completion of the current refurbishment, it is intended that DLH would re-open to the public with a new visitor offer in May 2016.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

- 43 The proposals in this report affect the North West Leicestershire divisions and this report has been circulated to the following Members - Mr J G Coxon CC, Dr. Terri Eynon CC, Mr T. Pendleton CC; Mr N. J. Rushton CC, Mr S. D. Sheahan CC, Mr L. Spence CC, Miss Heather Worman CC, and Mr M. Wyatt CC.

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List of Appendices

- Appendix A – Floor plan and series of illustrations
- Appendix B - 1620 Consultation programme

Appendix C – Consultation questionnaire - Helping us shape the future of the 1620s House at Donington le Heath

Appendix D – Teacher Consultation: 1620s House at Donington le Heath

Appendix E – Summary of consultation feedback

Appendix F – Proposals for admission charges to Donington le Heath Manor House and Gardens

Appendix G – Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment

Equality and Human Rights Implications

- 44 An Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment (EHRIA) screening has been completed and is attached as Appendix G. In summary, the EHRIA outlines the proposed changes to the DLH offer. The introduction of an admission charge has the potential to disadvantage low income groups and local people, who might be regular users. However, the proposal for a ticket which allows free repeat visits over a 12 month period, will mitigate this.
- 45 Due to the historic nature of DLH, it is not possible to provide full disabled access to the first floor. However, the new layout will provide access to more interpretation spaces on the ground floor and will also provide a new virtual tour. These measures will specifically enhance the offer for visitors where the stairs are an obstacle.
- 46 The screening exercise shows that the likely impact of the changes are positive and a full EHRIA report is not required.