

Report of: Leisure and Cultural Services Business Manager

To: Executive Board

Date: 17 July 2006

Item No:

Title of Report : Museum of Oxford Free Admission Trial



Summary and Recommendations



Purpose of report: Introduction of a trial period of free admission into the Museum of Oxford



Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Alan Armitage – Healthier Environment

Scrutiny Responsibility: Environment

Ward(s) affected: All

Report Approved by

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Alan Armitage

Legal: Jeremy Thomas

Finance: David King

BU Manager: Margaret Mernagh, Leisure and Cultural Services

Strategic Director: Sharon Cosgrove

Policy Framework: None

Recommendation(s):

That the Executive Board agrees the proposals regarding the trial period of admission into the Museum of Oxford, as set out in the report.



Introduction

1. It is proposed that the Museum of Oxford begin a trial period of free admission commencing in September 2006 for the duration of the 2006/7 financial year.
2. This proposal to remove admission charges supports the museum's Priority Aim to develop audiences, and is of particular benefit to the museum's target to develop an audience of local users.
3. The trial period will enable the museum to gain further information about the opportunities afforded by free admission to develop museum audiences and other income streams. This further information will be provided in a report during 2006, which will consider extending free admission from 2007-8 and set out the financial considerations of this extension.

Opportunities provided by removing admission charge

4. It is general opinion in the museum and wider cultural sector that admission charges create a limiting effect on the usage of museum services, and that removal of admission charges leads to an increase in visitor numbers. The Museum of Oxford is the only museum in Oxford City to charge for entry.
5. The Museum aims to increase and broaden its audiences and considering the removal of admission charges is an important factor to contribute towards this aim.
6. Removal of admission charges to develop museum audiences contributes to Oxford City Council's priority to reduce social exclusion and contribute to the Community Strategy Themes for a vibrant and inclusive economy, active and healthy communities and opportunities for life.
7. Removal of admission charges particularly benefits the museum's target development audience of local users. Free admission will provide more opportunities for local people to use the Museum Service, and encourage repeat visits from a local audience.
8. The removal of these charges was recommended in the Town Hall Feasibility Study Audience Development Plan, as a result of user and non-user consultation.
9. Specific opportunities afforded by removing admission charges are:
 - Increase in visitors to the museum site, permanent galleries and special exhibitions
 - Potential for attracting a broader and more diverse audience
 - Improvements in Best Value Performance Indicators BVPI 170a-c
 - Removal of financial barrier to visiting the museum
 - Better value for repeat visitors, particularly important for attracting local users

- Opportunities to increase usage of other museum services and income, for example retail, donations, public events tickets, guided tours
- Launch of free admission provides marketing tool
- Increased visitor use provides more opportunities for feedback from and involvement with a broader audience to increase the relevance of museum services to wider audiences
- Increased opportunities to join local marketing initiatives
- Increased users of the museum create a greater potential audience for Town Hall services and facilities, for example the Gallery, Gallery Café and events
- Easier enabling of physical links between Museum and Town Hall
- The Museum will no longer be the only museum in the city to charge for admission

10. It is recommended that the earliest date for implementation of this scheme is mid September 2006, this enables the museum to take advantage of marketing to local audiences. In particular it links to the start of the new academic year, the launch of a new exhibition aimed at local families and schools and the opening of the Town Hall at weekends.

Financial Implications of Removing Admission Charges

11. The Museum's current Business Plan and budgets reflect recommendations agreed by Executive Board in November 2005 for a review of the museum service:

- The Museum of Oxford remaining open for 2006/7 and 2007/8 (rather than mothball or close)
- The Museum and Carfax Tower contributing £15,700 towards the big savings in 2006/07 and £23,800 in 2007/8.
- The Museum puts in place a 3 year plan to increase income and reduce costs demonstrating a continuous reduction cost to the Authority whilst the longer Town Hall project is developed and tested.
- The Museum develops longer term plans to provide a more sustainable arrangement for the interpretation of the history of Oxford by investigating collaborative partnerships and alternative locations.

12. The museum has operated with periods of both free admission and charging throughout its history. Current charges for general museum admission were introduced over 10 years ago. Charges are:

Adult	£2.00	Concession	£1.50
Under 16	£0.50	Education/School visits (gallery only)	£0.50
Family:	£4.00		

13. The current income targets from admission tickets are:

	Proposed Budget 2006-7 £	Proposed Budget 2007-8 £
General Admission Charges	-26710	-28790
Admission charges for Schools/Education Groups – gallery visits (no workshop)	-875	-1100
Total Admissions Income	-27585	-29890
Total Museum Income	-52,200	-56,700

14. Admission charges form the main source of income from the museum.

15. The introduction of free admission in mid September would mean that based on admission income up to that point the estimated shortfall in admissions for 2006/7 will be approximately **£14,500**.

Other Income Opportunities

16. The museum has several other sources of income, including:

- Charges for school workshops
- Charges for public events & activities
- Retail
- Room hire
- Commission on art sales
- Photography and filming reproduction charges

17. Possible new income streams following the introduction of free admission could be monetary donations to the museum and charges for guided tours. However at this stage the museum has little comparable evidence to predict estimated income from these sources following the introduction of free admission.

18. Comparison of data from special event days suggests that free admission leads to an increase in visitor numbers, an obvious decrease in overall income due to the lack of admission fees but a rise in retail income. The increase in retail income goes some way to compensating for the loss of admission fees but is not sufficient to meet the current income targets.

19. Information on fee free days comes from specially promoted events, therefore this data does not reflect normal visiting patterns. In addition the museum demonstrates seasonal visiting patterns, making current limited data difficult to use for comparison.

20. It is possible to increase income from special events tickets if admission charges are removed. However, this may not be a significant increase as these events are limited by dedicated space and financial resources.

21. Overall, it is likely that income from other sources will provide a contribution towards the shortfall. However, there is not sufficient evidence at present to estimate increases in other income streams, and it remains unlikely that the museum will be able to meet the shortfall resulting from removal of admissions income by other means. However, the anticipated rise in the number of visitors to the museum is likely to improve visitor numbers and income within other areas of the Town Hall.

22. There are no external funding opportunities for core funding for the museum.

Costs to Introduce Free Admission

23. In addition to the loss of income, the removal of the admission charge for the trial period from September 2006 to March 2007 has the following cost implications. Figures provided are **estimates only**.

Action	Estimated Cost 2006-7 £	Timescale
Replace recently distributed printed publicity material, including design work, reprinting and distribution. (This cost is optional but recommended to help promote free admission and ensure accurate information)	(3100 Optional)	One –off costs in summer 2006
Purchase and install equipment to monitor and manage visitors including visitor counters and barriers	500	One-off costs in summer 2006
Purchase and install a donations box	500	One-off cost in summer 2006
Replacement of visitor information signs	500	One-off cost in summer 2006
Supply additional materials for increase in users e.g. information leaflets, gallery activity materials, postage for mailing lists	300	September 2006 – March 2007
Undertake increased maintenance to museum site and museum objects, including specialist museum object care	700	September 2006 – March 2007
Supply additional staffing for peak periods (estimate based on proportion of annual requirement of 10 weeks, 1 casual staff at 30 hours)	1500	September 2006 – March 2007
Extend staff hours to undertake additional cleaning and opening	1800	September 2006 – March

preparations (estimate based on proportion of annual requirement of 312 days at 1 hour)		2007
Total	5800 (8900 with publicity costs)	

24. There is the possibility that increased user numbers will have additional cost implications in subsequent years, should this trial be extended, for example to install CCTV and improve site access and facilities for a range of users.

Summary of Financial Implications

25. The financial implications of introducing the trial free admission are summarised below. A proposal for meeting the shortfall in the museum budget and meeting the implementation costs is covered in a separate "Year End Financial Monitoring Report" on this agenda.

Action	Estimated Cost £	Timescale
Removal of Admissions income	14,500	September 2006 – March 2007
Implementation costs	5800 (8900 with publicity costs)	One-off costs and September 2006 – March 2007
Total estimated cost to trial free admission September 2006- March 2007	20,300 (23,400)	

Other Considerations

26. In order to maintain the reputation for good customer satisfaction the museum must ensure that a high level customer care and a safe and secure environment for staff, visitors and collections are provided following the removal of admission charges and the probable resulting increase in users. The Museum has identified operational amendments to implement to ensure excellent customer care and efficient operation of site and services. However, due to the timing of this report further work is required in order to fully prepare for free admission, particularly regarding fire and evacuation procedures and site capacity.

27. At present three Visitor Services staff are required to safely operate the museum, provide customer care and deliver educational activities. The museum has required additional staff to cater for the increased numbers of users on recent free entry days. The removal of admission charges and a large increase in visitors to the galleries at peak times is likely to require additional staffing, as has been proposed in this report. It is particularly

important that the museum is able to continue to deliver and develop all services in addition to gallery visits including education and outreach.

28. The museum must be enabled to put in place procedures to ensure the safety of staff and visitors. During a previous period of free admission the museum recorded instances of difficult customers, particularly due to the layout of the museum and isolated location of the site away from the main Town Hall entrance. It is also noted that the Town Hall currently experiences problems with difficult customers. The museum has had initial discussions with the Town Hall regarding provision of back-up support during difficult situations. Training in assertiveness and dealing with difficult customers is recommended.

29. The Museum acknowledges that developments must be made to improve physical and intellectual access to the museum site, information and collections. This becomes a priority if audiences increase and become more diverse. The Museum is creating an Access and Gallery Improvement Plan to improve facilities and access. Additional or external funding will be required to implement these plans.

Conclusions

30. This report highlights initial opportunities and implications for removing admission charges to the museum for the period September 2006 - March 2007. The timescale of this report has not enabled detailed research into the implications of free admission. It must be noted that the museum has little evidence at present to predict the effect that free admission will have on customer care, income, site and operational costs, user numbers and continued development of other services such as education and outreach.

31. The proposal supports the museum's aim to increase audiences, and will be of particular benefit to the museum's target development audience of local users.

32. A trial period of free admission from September 2006 to March 2007 will require a financial commitment of a minimum of £20,300 to implement the scheme. A proposal for meeting the shortfall in the museum budget and meeting the implementation costs is covered in a separate "Year End Financial Monitoring Report" on this agenda.

33. Removal of admission charges will enable the museum to develop other small income streams to contribute towards the shortfall following removal of admissions income.

34. Further information on the opportunities and cost implications of extending free admission from 2007-8 and beyond will be detailed in a further report during 2006. This trial period will enable the museum to amend policies and procedures to cater for increased audiences and to gain vital information about user numbers, income streams, costs to deliver services, health and safety and customer care. However, the seasonal nature of visiting patterns

and the long-term nature of marketing to local and tourist audiences means a longer period of evaluation may be required to fully understand the opportunities afforded by free admission.

35. It is also important to view this proposal in terms of a long-term commitment to free admission. Removal of free admission after a short period will have a damaging affect on museum profile, customer care and audience development.

36. This report recommends that the Executive Board agrees proposals regarding the trial period of free admission into the Museum of Oxford.

Jackie Hunt
Museum Development Manager / Curator
Museum of Oxford
Tel: 01865 252795
Email: jhunt@:oxford.gov.uk

Background papers: None

