

Report of: Leisure and Cultural Services Business Manager

To: Executive Board

Date: 18th December 2006

Item No:

Title of Report : Museum of Oxford Free Admission



Summary and Recommendations



Purpose of report: To evaluate the free admission trial at the Museum of Oxford and explore the opportunity to make it permanent



Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Alan Armitage, Healthier Environment Portfolio

Scrutiny Responsibility: Environment



Area(s) affected:

Report Approved by



Portfolio Holder: Councillor Armitage

Legal: Jeremy Thomas



Finance: Christopher Kaye

Strategic Director: Sharon Cosgrove



Policy Framework: None



Recommendation(s): To extend the trial free admission period for the Museum of Oxford for a further year from April 2007 to March 2008



Background

1. At its meeting on 17th July 2006 Executive Board agreed to introduce a trial period of free admission to the Museum of Oxford from 16th September 2006 to 31st March 2007, with a view to assessing whether to make this a permanent arrangement.
2. This proposal to remove admission charges supports the museum's Priority Aim to develop audiences, and is particularly relevant to the museum's target to develop an audience of local users.
3. 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.
4. The removal of the charges was recommended in the Town Hall Feasibility Study Audience Development Plan, as a result of user and non-user consultation.
5. It should be noted that during this trial period the museum have been without a Museum Development Manager to lead the project, the new manager has now been appointed and will join the Council in January 2007.
6. The museum has recently been granted accreditation under the Museum and Libraries and Archives Scheme. A performance indicator using Museum Accreditation now forms part of Cultural Services Assessments for county and single tier local authorities. The scheme emphasises the needs and interests of those who use museums - or who might be encouraged to do so in the future.

Visitor Figures

7. At the time of writing this report data gathered relates to seven weeks of free museum entry from 16th September to 5th November, which is a relatively short period to base conclusions on, especially given that the museum is entering a traditionally quieter visitor season. During this period the museum launched its new temporary exhibition, Exploring Space. It has also run two special event days and a week of half term activities.
8. In order to calculate visitor numbers to the museum a visitor counter has been installed on the stairs leading to the galleries.
9. The following table details a comparison of the visitor figures during the period of free admission with the same period last year when charges were still in place.

	Sept 05	Sept 06	Oct 05	Oct 06
Paid Admissions	2586	1066 up to 16 th Sept	2202	N/A

Visitor Counter in galleries	N/A	2622 from 16 th Sept	N/A	4333
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10. The counter is reset daily and is calculated by taking the actual reading daily then subtracting 20% which allows for staff usage of the stairs and people doubling back on themselves and coming back out of the entrance as opposed to following the route of the museum. The 20% figure has been adopted following a week of sampling of how many times the stairs were used by staff and visitors coming back up them and is felt to be an accurate assumption on this basis.

11. The counter figures show a significant increase in the visitor numbers to the museum, an indicator that is backed up by the general observation of the busier status of the museum at a time that is traditionally viewed as a quieter season for the attraction.

12. The gallery counter shows that there was an increase of 1030 visitors (39%) to the museum in September 06 compared to September 05 and an increase of 2131 visitors (96%) in October 06 compared to October 05. The sharp increase in October has been attributed to the large numbers of visitors who attended special event days and widely promoted half term activities.

13. The museum has recorded some its highest ever visitor figures during this period. The special event days that have been promoted have realised the following successful results:

Saturday 14 October, 'Explore a Space Dome' & 'Sky at Night'

Visitors could take a guided tour of the constellations, make rockets and spaceships, and visit the special exhibition 'Exploring Space'.

Total 635 visitors

Thursday 26 October, Halloween Family Day

Visitors could meet an 18th century witch, join in with scary storytelling and face painting. Follow a Halloween trail or make a spooky spider at the creation station.

Total 707 visitors

14. This data suggests that if the museum is to continue to attract these high visitor figures the programme of special events and activities must be built on and enhanced. However this is likely to incur additional costs in terms of staffing and materials that will need to be considered.

15. Data collected before the free trial was introduced showed that between April 2006 and 16th September 2006, 2196 people came into the museum without visiting the galleries. This data gives a snapshot of the reasons people gave for not visiting the galleries but only includes those who actually spoke to

the museum assistants on reception and therefore the actual figure is likely to be significantly higher.

Reason given for not visiting galleries	Number of people
Admission charges	1540
Wanted to use toilets but no toilets in museum	171
Wanted to use café but no café in museum	29
Wrong Museum	169
Access Issues	35
Other	252

16. The table above shows that the majority of people did not wish to enter the galleries due to the admission charges. Other reasons for coming to the museum but not entering the galleries are asking for directions, historical enquires or tourism enquiries.

Profile of visitors

17. One of the main reasons for the introduction of free admission was to encourage more Oxford residents to visit the museum. Through general discussions with visitors staff have ascertained that a large number of visitors are first time visitors from the Oxford area who have been made aware of the free admission.

18. A survey was carried out for two weeks between 24th October and 5th November into where people have come from to visit the museum and whether they would still visit if admission charges were in place. The survey was carried out during this period as it was felt that the initial flurry of people visiting the museum because it had just been launched as free would be over and a more consistent view could be gathered. It was seen as a test for the sustainability of the initial publicity surrounding the free entry and for the effectiveness of word of mouth as it was always believed that the first few weeks of free entry would be popular. The survey period included half term week from 24th – 30th October.

19. The survey showed that 60% of the people who visited the museum during this time were Oxford residents, within the OX1, OX2, OX3 and OX4 postcode areas. A breakdown of the percentage of residents who visited the museum according to postcode is as follows:

OX1 – 27%
OX2 – 18%
OX3 – 34%
OX4 – 21%

20. Of all of the visitors surveyed 84% were visiting for the first time. With 52% of the total respondents indicating that they would be prepared to pay a small entry charge to visit the museum.

21. The special event days are known to have attracted mainly local family groups reflective of where the days were promoted, eg schools, primary times, local newspapers, BBC radio Oxford.

Loss of income and income Opportunities

22. The current income targets from admission charges for 2007/8 are:

General Admission Charges	-28790
Admission charges for Schools/Education Groups – gallery visits (no workshop)	-1100
Total Admissions Income	-29890

23. When considering carry forward estimates at its meeting on 17th July 2006 this committee approved the provision of £29,890 to supplement the loss of admission income at the museum should the period of free entry be made permanent.

24. The report tabled at this committee relating to the free admission trial on 17th July 2006 outlined the sources of income that would be investigated during the trial period. This included the introduction of a donations scheme, retail sales, museum trails and special event days. The following table outlines the income received from these sources:

Income Source	Sept 05	Sept 06	Oct 05	Oct 06
Admissions	2290.50	850	2606	0
Shop Income	1404	931	1500	1329
Activities	125	124.50	60	51
Hire Services	10	10	16.75	216.25
Talks/Events	0	0	0	160.50
Trails/Worksheets	0	15	24.50	278.80
Workshops	407.50	84	509.50	771
Donations	0	22	0	125
Total including admissions	4237	2036.50	4716.75	2931.55
Total without admissions	1946.50	1186.50	2110.75	2931.55

25. The table above shows that as expected income from sources other than admissions have not made up the shortfall created by the loss of admission charges. However, the busy half term and increased emphasis on promoting special events and trails in October has realised an increase of £820 when compared to last year.

26. Shop income has however not increased in line with the number of visitors. Possible explanations identified for this are:

- that the shop caters mainly for the tourist market and an increase in trade from the local visitor market would not increase the sales of these items.
- that the increase in visitor numbers has meant that the visitors do not find it comfortable to browse around the already small shop which is currently situated in the same area as the reception desk.
- that the shop faces increasing competition from other tourist outlets selling the same sort of stock.

27. Part of the visitor survey carried out asked for feedback on the goods sold in the shop, the following were the most popular suggestions for stock:

- Local Crafts
- Fairtrade items
- Locally made products
- Museum specific postcards and souvenirs
- Snack type foods
- Alice in Wonderland products (already stocked)

28. A review of shop stock is planned in the New Year and options are being considered as to how the shop and reception could be re-orientated to house the reception desk in the foyer area immediately in front of the main entrance doors. This would increase the floor space in the shop significantly allowing stock to be displayed more appropriately, different items to be stocked and giving customers the ability to browse more freely around the shop both before and after they have visited the galleries. This would be subject to a capital bid for the cost of these changes.

Links and opportunities with the Town Hall

29. The introduction of free admission allows the opportunity to consider how to action opening up the back door to the museum which opens into the drill hall corridor to allow an internal link from the Town Hall building into the museum. At this stage it has not been possible to implement this system due to security issues given that there is no CCTV within the museum and there are no staff members permanently situated at this point in the gallery. Concerns were raised that items could be easily removed from the museum without staff being aware or that children visiting the museum in groups or with families may be able to wander out of the museum unsupervised and undiscovered.

30. Officers have been working on a scheme to create a new entrance space at the back door which would allow visitors to enter the museum with an automated door entry system from the drill hall corridor, however exiting from this door would require the use of an entry phone system with CCTV operated at the main reception. This way museum staff would be able to securely control who leaves the building from this door. It is thought that this scheme can be funded through existing capital funds allocated for 2006/7 financial year, this is to be investigated further.

31. Opening the back door to the museum is an essential requirement to ensure the museum's compliance with current DDA regulations. It is the only accessible entrance but requires work to bring it up to standard.

32. The re-orientation and refurbishment of the museum forms a large part of the Town Hall improvement project that is currently being investigated. By developing a main entrance into the museum direct from the Town Hall it will reinforce the notion that the Town Hall is a cultural hub for the city, comprising of heritage, artistic, community and commercial activities for residents and tourists. Strengthening the link between the Town Hall and the museum will allow joint marketing opportunities, combined tours and added value for both Town Hall and Museum visitors alike.

33. When considering an HLF bid free admission into the museum is likely to be a positive factor.

Visitor Comments and views from other museums

34. It is the 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.

35. When admission charges were scrapped in December 2001 for all national museums and galleries DCMS announced a 62% increase in visitor numbers within 7 months. The data collected from the Museum of Oxford during this initial seven week period suggests an increase in line with this of 67%.

36. Feedback received from Buxton Museum and Art Gallery on their experiences of introducing free admission centred around the fact that a six month trial period of free admission may be too short given that free admission was introduced by them two years ago and they have not yet recouped the financial loss attached to the loss of admission income, however they feel this is balanced out in terms of goodwill and positive reactions from the public.

37. Comments received from visitors to the Museum of Oxford since the introduction of free admission have been varied but mainly positive.

Comments have included:

- Keep it free. A wonderful record of Oxford's history.
- Wonderful museum, really liked the video. Liked this museum think it was hugely informative.
- If you had made it free years ago I would have brought my children regularly.
- This is the first time I have visited with my children but I have lived here all my life. What a wonderful resource.
- I was happy to give a donation at the end of our visit, it was great.
- I didn't realise it existed and I have lived here 20 years.

- The charge may have been small previously but it can mount up when you bring a family but we have enjoyed ourselves a lot.
- The space day was great, more activities like this please.
- Why should my Council Tax subsidise free admission for people who do not live in the City?
- You should put a small charge on the entrance. Just to help maintain the museum. Even £1 is cheap.

Conclusions

38. The evidence suggests that in terms of visitor figures the trial has been a huge success, however this report has only considered the first seven weeks of the trial and as such there may not be sufficient evidence to suggest that this trend will continue.

39. Evidence from the usage of the shop, the uptake of family activities and the visitor survey suggests that a majority, albeit a small one, are visitors from the local area. It is however not certain whether this trend will continue once the initial publicity surrounding free admission dies down. A further survey sampling into who our visitors are is planned for the New Year.

40. It is unlikely that any increases in shop income will be realised until the review of shop stock in the New Year, especially as it is now approaching a quieter period in terms of visitors given that it does not currently cater for the local audience.

41. October saw increased income from sources such as trails, donations and planned activities suggesting that a large number of the visitors have attended the museum to take part in specific activities due to improved publicity and marketing.

42. Opening the back door into the museum from the Town Hall can only be carried out if entry to the museum remains free as resources do not allow for a staff member to be permanently situated at the back entrance.

43. With further sampling into visitors to be carried out and reviews into shop orientation and stock to be carried it could be considered beneficial to extend the trial period of free admission for a further year from April 2007 to March 2008.

44. Extending the free admission for a full year would allow a thorough review of who our audiences are, how to market to them and the differing trends throughout the different seasons. This would also allow for the fact that the annual leaflet advertising the museum is printed and distributed only once during the year at the beginning of the financial year and would ensure that data surrounding pricing in the leaflet would remain current for its entire circulation period.

Recommendation

45. To extend the trial free admission period for the Museum of Oxford for a further year from April 2007 to March 2008.

Background papers: None

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