

Proposal for the Integration of Royal Leamington Spa Visitor Information Centre with Cultural Services

1. CONTEXT

- 1.1. The 'arts section' of Cultural Services, which includes the Royal Spa Centre, Royal Leamington Spa Town Hall, Arts Development and the Art Gallery & Museum (together with the wider operation of the Royal Pump Rooms), recently underwent a service review. Upon the conclusion of the review it was recommended that those separate areas be amalgamated into one team in order to create a more efficient, consistent service with a combined management team and joint approach to delivery. The final proposals were considered and approved at the Employment Committee in December and will be implemented from January 2017. The subsequent 'at risk' and trial periods would run until 9th March 2017.
- 1.2. This proposal seeks to integrate the operation of the Royal Leamington Spa Visitor Information Centre into the restructured arts section of Cultural Services. It is motivated by issues raised by staff during the consultation period of the arts review. The working group consistently received feedback from the Art Gallery & Museum (AG&M) team regarding the Visitor Information Centre (VIC) and the shared concourse area located in the main front entrance of the Royal Pump Rooms.
- 1.3. The relevant issues raised by the AG&M team were:
 - a) The current VIC opening hours are not aligned with the needs of visitors and residents. The AG&M team regularly receive complaints from the public on the days when the VIC is closed.
 - b) The positioning of the Art Gallery & Museum within the Royal Pump Rooms is not ideal. The main entrance to the AG&M is not prominent and the galleries have no presence within the expansive concourse space, which may have a detrimental effect upon attendance. Many anecdotal examples were supplied of long-time visitors to the building who were completely unaware that the AG&M was located within the Royal Pump Rooms.
 - c) When the VIC is closed, being located within the open plan, public concourse, it is necessary to secure the area with large, floor to ceiling shutters which are highly visible from the entrance and convey the false impression to the public that the building as a whole is also 'closed'. It is believed that this acts as a significant deterrent which has a detrimental effect on footfall into the building.
 - d) A range of services are delivered from the Royal Pump Rooms by third party organisations such as Kudos (which operates the café, annex and Assembly Rooms), Warwickshire County Council (the library service 'hub') and Warwick Town Council (the VIC). These organisations are classed as 'joint operators', who have a high degree of autonomy within their own areas of the building and are also theoretically jointly responsible for the management of shared public areas. However, in practice the AG&M team, as the on-site representatives of Warwick District Council, are heavily relied upon to support the day-to-day operation of the building. The reception within the Art Gallery & Museum is therefore commonly considered to be the

reception for the building as a whole. It was felt by the team that the challenges this presents have never been fully addressed to the satisfaction of the AG&M team or the joint operators.

- e) It is necessary for the staff that work at the reception desk within the AG&M to be knowledgeable about the local area and familiar with the history of the Royal Pump Rooms. They receive a high amount of enquiries from visitors who seek information about the building and the local area.
- f) The AG&M and VIC both have modest retail ventures which offer a comparable range of high quality merchandise. It was felt by the team that there is an element of duplication as the merchandise is of a similar type - being primarily focused on the Pump Rooms itself or heritage of Royal Leamington Spa. During the 2015/16 financial year the AG&M gift shop generated approximately £6,000 of net income and the VIC shop achieved £22,500 (with approximately 50% of that income being profit after the cost of sales is deducted).

1.4. The working group also received comments regarding the VIC and associated issues from the Royal Spa Centre & Town Hall team during the review:

- a) There has been a long held concern regarding the current location of the Royal Spa Centre box office at the Town Hall and its potentially adverse impact on ticket sales. Footfall through that building is comparatively low, making impulsive purchases by passers-by unlikely. Despite being situated on the main Parade in the centre of Leamington Spa, the Town Hall is not perceived by audiences as an accessible, convenient or obvious location.
- b) The team are aware that the disposal of the Town Hall has been flagged as a corporate project within the next stage of *Fit for the Future* and that the future of the building is uncertain from 2018 onwards. The team were concerned what the potential consequences of this might be for the box office function.
- c) The VIC area was repeatedly suggested by the team as a feasible and appealing alternative location for the daytime box office - due to its prominent position and high levels of footfall.
- d) Being located within the Town Hall, a building that continues to be perceived as a 'civic hub' by a number of local residents, the box office receives a wide range of general enquiries from the public about the Council, the town and the building itself. First time visitors to the area also naturally gravitate towards the building as its architecture is so distinctive. Royal Leamington Spa Town Council and a Warwick University Learning Hub are also based in the building and the box office also partially acts as a reception service. As a result it has been necessary for the Box Office Assistants to broaden their knowledge about the area and their understanding of the Council in order to serve this wide range of customers. Many of the team see the amalgamation with the VIC service as the next logical, natural step.
- e) The box office opening hours are currently not aligned with the needs of customers. Ideally the service would be available during working hours.

1.5 The provision of the VIC falls under the scope of Warwick District Council's Economic Development team, which has an agreement with Warwick Town Council in place to operate the service. This agreement is due to expire at the end of March 2017 and so it seems a logical time to reassess the Council's options for

delivery. The recent restructure of the arts team provides a unique opportunity for Warwick District Council to make improved use of its assets to enhance service delivery.

2. DETAILS OF THE PROPOSAL

- 2.1. The key principle of this proposal is to pool the Council's resources by relocating both the box office function from Town Hall and the reception desk from within the AG&M to the entrance of the Royal Pump Rooms and to combine it with the current visitor information service. In order to deliver all of those services successfully it would be necessary to combine the resources of the teams and create new roles.
- 2.2. This is a commonplace model and visitor information services are often integrated into public buildings such as museums, art galleries or other local attractions that tourists are naturally drawn to. It is also increasingly common for those services to be delivered by one team – selling gifts, merchandise and tickets for entry as well as acting as a reception for the venue and providing face-to-face information and advice to visitors to the area- from a single point.
- 2.3. The intention would be to merge the current roles of Senior Gallery Assistant, Box Office Assistant and VIC Assistant into a single role and to form a cross-trained team from the existing members who would then be able to deliver all aspects of the services.
- 2.4. It would remain necessary to maintain a back office box office function in order to continue telephone bookings. This could also feasibly be relocated to that area and staffed by the same team. As well as answering telephone calls and selling tickets the frontline staff could process retail sales and respond to face-to-face enquiries. It is the intention that there would also be a supervisory, 'team leader' role based at the desk that could be mobile around the building and act as a first point of contact for the joint operators, staff and visitors.
- 2.5. It would also be the intention to make a one-off investment in the VIC area and update the current offering. It is suggested that this could potentially funded by the release of the annual administration grant currently allocated to Warwick Town Council.
- 2.6. The specific objectives of this project would be:
 - a) To extend both the VIC and box office opening hours and align them with visitor expectation and demand - at no additional cost to WDC
 - b) To maximise income generation for WDC through greater volume of ticket and retail sales - with the continuing aim of lowering the cost of the service overall
 - c) To increase the footfall through the AG&M and the Royal Pump Rooms building. To encourage visitors and residents to use the building more widely - attracting different users
 - d) To create a more collaborative approach between service areas, with Cultural Services working closely with Development Services to ensure that the operation reflects the priorities of the Destination Management Plan
 - e) To create an improved, convenient and coherent offering for service users - following the one-stop shop model. Visitors should be provided with

accurate information and advice about the local area, signposted to events occurring within the building and wider District and also be able purchase tickets for those events at the same time.

- f) To refresh the offering at the front of the building and to make the design more appealing. To review the concourse area and create a more pleasurable and coherent experience for visitors which clearly signposts them to the various services. Perhaps utilising technology and the work of the AG&M to increase engagement.
- g) To reframe the area as a reception for the wider building allowing the Council to take greater operational control and increase supervision of the shared areas.

2.7 If this proposal was considered viable it would be necessary for a service review to commence immediately, with an aim to take a report to Employment Committee on 22nd March. It would not be possible to run the box office service alongside the current VIC model until the teams were combined, because of the complications surrounding ICT requirements, training and cash handling. The scope of the review is relatively simple and so the timetable is achievable. However, it may be necessary to either extend the agreement with Warwick Town Council on an ad-hoc basis or to transfer the VIC staff over to the employ of Warwick District Council and to operate as currently until such time as the review can be completed.

2.8 Extended Opening Hours

2.8.1 The current opening hours for the various services involved are:

	CURRENT OPENING HOURS*		Per Day	Per Week
Visitor Information Centre	Monday	CLOSED	0	30 hrs
	Tuesday - Friday	11:00 – 16:00	5 hrs	
	Saturday	10:00 – 16:00	6 hrs	
	Sunday	11:00 – 15:00	4 hrs	
Art Gallery & Museum	Monday	CLOSED	0	36 hrs, 15 mins
	Tuesday - Saturday	10:45 – 17:00	6 hrs, 15 mins	
	Sunday	11.00 – 16.00	5	
RSC&TH Box Office	Monday	10:00 – 17:00	7 hrs	27 hrs
	Tuesday – Saturday	10:00 – 14:00	4 hrs	
	Sunday	CLOSED	0	

2.8.2 The VIC opening hours fluctuate seasonally, opening on Sundays during the summer months (April – October), 11:00 – 15:00. During the autumn/ winter season the VIC is closed on Sundays. The AG&M also opens on public holidays under Sunday opening hours. The RSC&TH box office closes on public bank holidays.

2.8.3 It is assumed, for the purposes of this report, that the ideal opening hours that the project would attempt to deliver through the combined function would be:

10:00 – 17:00 Monday to Saturday (42 hours per week)
10:00 – 16:00 on Sundays (6 hours)

This would total 48 hours per week and would represent an increase of 21 hours for the current box office service and 18 for the VIC. The eventual confirmed opening hours would depend on the number of posts and working hours available and the staffing costs involved – which could only be calculated after a more thorough service review which would also explore operational feasibility and visitor demand. However, given the resources that the Council already has, the above opening hours are thought to be achievable at this stage.

- 2.8.4 In order to extend the opening hours in this way it would be necessary to amalgamate staffing hours. For the improved service to be delivered at no additional cost to the Council it is proposed that the current roles and functions of Senior Gallery Assistant, VIC Assistant and Box Office Assistant be combined into a new single role. It is believed that the similarities of tasks and responsibilities between the various roles and the comparable skills required would make this amalgamation realistic and achievable, although training would be required.
- 2.8.5 It would be necessary to carry out a review of visitor demand in order to fully establish the opening hours and service requirements. It would also be necessary to follow WDC's formal service review process and consult with the staff concerned. New posts would be created and it is highly likely that current working patterns would have to be changed. As the current VIC staff are employed by Warwick Town Council there may also be an obligation to transfer the employment of those individuals to Warwick District Council under TUPE regulations. The timeline for this could only be confirmed once Warwick District Council's HR department had begun the official review process.
- 2.8.6 Currently, the Visitor Information Assistants work in pairs, as the VIC is effectively a satellite site, remote from Warwick Visitor Information Centre and so lone-working becomes problematic. It would become more feasible to stagger the amount of staff present during a shift if they became part of the wider arts team, with colleagues based in the same building and with a supervisor on site. It may be possible to reallocate staffing resources to the periods when demand is highest, improving the standard of service to the public.
- 2.8.7 At this stage it is not possible to accurately describe the details of this proposed new role or the working patterns of the operation. The staff concerned have not yet been consulted with. However, it is probable that this team would be included as part of the newly created Programming & Marketing team within the arts section. That team's focus would be the promotion of events and exhibitions (both ticketed and free of charge) across the arts section and also currently includes the box office function. This team's responsibilities also include the programming/ booking of spaces and it will have an overview of the District's cultural events, so there is an obvious alignment of priorities with the information service provided by the VIC. It is also likely that the existing Box Office Supervisor role could be adapted so that the team would have a dedicated supervisor located at the Royal Pump Rooms, to support staff on a day to day basis, which is not the case currently.

2.9 Income Generation

- 2.9.1 During the 2015/16 financial year the Royal Spa Centre & Town Hall box office

took £923,265 of income from ticket sales. The level of income through the box office has steadily increased over the last three years, as the venue's offering has improved, and sales remain on an upward trajectory. The average annual footfall through the Town Hall and box office is currently only 55,000. The Royal Pump Rooms has a much greater annual footfall of approximately 500,000. It is anticipated that the combination of extended opening hours, joined up promotion and the increased footfall through the physical box office would result in an added increase in ticket sales. The additional staffing would also ensure that demand was met at peak times and that potential transactions were not lost.

2.9.2 The Royal Spa Centre & Town Hall already acts as a ticketing agent for many local community organisations and events, for which it receives additional income through commission. During financial year 2015/16 the box office sold £58,490 of tickets for events at other sites on behalf of community organisations. Those companies benefitted greatly from being included within the Royal Spa Centre & Town Hall listings as it brought those smaller events to the attention of new audiences that event organisers might otherwise not have the resources to reach. The Royal Spa Centre & Town Hall also benefits in the same way, as many of the audiences for those agency events may not have attended the theatre or seen its programme of events before.

2.9.3 There is a strong supporting business case for WDC to expand its box office agency function by becoming a ticketing agency for larger events in the District. The business model would be strengthened if the primary daytime box office were to be located in a prominent building with high levels of footfall. This would be highly appealing for those organisations who are not capable of running their own ticketing operation. The advantages of this would not solely be financial. With more audiences looking to the same place for information about events it would ensure greater awareness and exposure for all concerned and grow audiences which is ultimately mutually beneficial for all.

2.10 Increased Footfall

2.10.1 This proposal also offers the opportunity to review the flow of visitors through the concourse area. It would also be possible to integrate publicity for the AG&M and even use that space to bring exhibitions and objects out into the concourse and make AG&M a more integral part of the building's identity.

2.11 Collaboration

2.11.1 One of the key recommendations made by the recent arts service review was that the new post of Arts Manager be created in order to work more closely with WDC colleagues to deliver the strategic objectives of the arts section. It is anticipated that this role would work closely with colleagues in Development Services to ensure the objectives of the tourism agenda were met. If WDC staff were utilised to operate the combined operation it would ensure that those priorities of the Council were implemented.

2.12 Service Improvement

2.12.1 It is anticipated that the combined function would be of added benefit to service users. The shared knowledge and experience of the team would mean that service users would be offered a more rounded service. The team could continue

to build upon the excellent standard of service currently on offer and provide customers with information on the local area (with a focus on Royal Leamington Spa, but also the wider district), in-depth knowledge of events and venues, information about partner organisations and signpost potential visitors to the Art Gallery & Museum. It is hoped that the added box office function would also encourage new users to experience the information service for the first time.

2.13 Refurbishment

2.13.1 By reallocating the grant funding currently provided to Warwick Town Council to operate the Leamington Spa VIC there is an opportunity to refurbish the area. It is suggested that the retail offering within the AG&M and VIC could be combined. With relatively low levels of investment it may be possible to bring the high standard of exhibitions and displays of the AG&M into foyer space and make the whole area more integrated and vibrant. As one of the district's most valuable heritage assets it is important that the concourse area reflects its identity as a cultural space. It is also important to reflect the investment that will shortly be made into the Pump Room Gardens and ensure that there is an improved link between the two areas. The relocation of the AG&M reception would also free up much needed gallery space.

2.14 Operational Control

2.14.1 Currently, it is extremely challenging for the Council to have sufficient operational control over the wider Royal Pump Rooms building, as its representatives are located in the Arts Gallery & Museum space. There is extremely comprehensive CCTV coverage of the building, but this is located at the AG&M desk. It is suggested that by relocating that desk to the concourse it will be possible for the Council to have greater control over the shared public area.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 The Art Gallery & Museum

3.1.1 The use of the AG&M is highest at weekends, when it is very well attended. A broad programme of engaging, high quality exhibitions and events is available throughout the year. The annual footfall is approximately 115,000 which is 23% of the total footfall through the Royal Pump Rooms. The primary footfall generator is the library, located next to the AG&M.

3.1.2 The AG&M is now closed on Mondays and is open a total of 36 hours, 15 minutes a week. Opening hours were previously reduced as part of the Fit for the Future savings.

3.1.3 On weekdays when the AG&M is open it is usual to have at least two Gallery Assistants on duty alongside a Senior Gallery Assistant. The gallery areas of the AG&M must be monitored at all times in order to prevent theft or damage to the exhibits / art works on display. These areas are manned on a rotation pattern with

one role supervising the temporary gallery space, one role roaming between museum and art gallery and one role situated at the reception desk.

- 3.1.4 The member of staff allocated to the reception desk answers telephone calls, monitors the internal and external CCTV cameras, processes shop sales, greets visitors and answers enquires. The AG&M reception desk is also the first point of contact for the joint operators if there is an issue in their area.
- 3.1.5 The Senior Gallery Assistant also has a wider responsibility - supervising the Gallery Assistants, carrying out perimeter checks and dealing with enquiries and emergencies. The most common issues that the Senior Gallery Assistant deals with are complaints about the public toilets or anti-social behaviour within the concourse or the external perimeter of the building. Other examples of issues include general enquiries, welcoming visitors, dealing with deliveries and managing parking.
- 3.1.6 The Senior Gallery Assistants are able to secure the building and operate fire/ intruder alarms. Although the joint operators are responsible for evacuating their own customers during an emergency, the Senior Gallery Assistant is the member of staff who would coordinate and liaise with the emergency services. There is a tension within the role as a balance must always be struck between being part of the gallery rotation and being available to respond to any situations that may arise.

3.2 The Royal Leamington Spa Visitor Information Centre

- 3.2.1 The Visitor Information Centre in Royal Leamington Spa provides residents and visitors with general information about the area, ensures that promotional materials of interest are effectively displayed and kept up to date and sells merchandise from the shop. The staff offer friendly, helpful guidance and advice on things to see and do in the area, with a Royal Leamington Spa focus.
- 3.2.2 The District's towns are renowned for having very few areas in which to display promotional materials or advertising. Opportunities to purchase advertising space are scarce and the few that there are can often be prohibitively expensive for smaller organisations. The District has a wealth of community activity that residents can attend / participate in and many attractions that are of interest to visitors to the region. The Royal Pump Rooms is an iconic building within the town and many first time visitors gravitate towards it – many visiting the café. Therefore, the VIC's has become an extremely important focus for event organisers who wish to promote their event.

3.3 The Royal Spa Centre & Town Hall Box Office Service

- 3.3.1 It became necessary to relocate the Royal Spa Centre box office from its previous location at the front of the theatre when the venue's auditorium seating was replaced and the foyers were refurbished in 2011. In order for the improved, raked, bleacher / retractable seating to be installed in the stalls area it meant that the auditorium entrances sited at the back of the hall had to be relocated to one side. To allow for the access route into the auditorium, the back office and box office areas were removed.

- 3.3.2 A much reduced, smaller box office was added the end of the stalls bar in the ground floor foyer area for temporary use before and during performances. The main, daytime box office was relocated to the reception area of the Town Hall as a temporary measure while an alternative box office software could be sourced. It was thought at the time that the new ticketing software would allow the Council to sell tickets from any area with a broadband connection. It was planned that multiple points of sale would be created across the District - following the one stop shop approach. However this proved to be impractical at an operational level, as the staff using the system would not have had a working knowledge of the venues. There were also complications around data protection and cash handling that could not be solved at the time. Therefore, due to a lack of more viable alternatives, the daytime box office has remained at the Town Hall.
- 3.3.3 Following a service review in 2013 which combined the teams that operated the Royal Spa Centre and Town Hall the opening hours of the box office were reduced from 10am - 5pm Monday to Friday, 10am - 2pm Saturdays to 10am - 5pm Monday and 10am - 2pm Tuesday – Saturday, a reduction of 12 hours. The amount of box office staff on duty during those shifts was also reduced. This was done after an analysis of the box office sales patterns highlighted the hours that 80% of transactions were made.
- 3.3.4 Currently, one full time member of staff delivers the box office service, selling tickets, assisting with enquiries and acting as first point of contact for the Town Hall. At peak times casual staff are brought into assist. In 2015/6 a total of 1,747 staff hours were allocated to the box office.
- 3.3.5 Over 68,000 tickets were sold through the Royal Spa Centre and Town Hall box office in 2015/16 and 50% of those sales were made either over the counter or telephone.