

Report to: Joint Museums Committee, 7th March 2024

Report of: Museums Manager

Subject: 2023-24 QUARTERS 2 AND 3 PERFORMANCE

1. Recommendation

That the Joint Committee

- 1.1 note the performance information relating to the 2nd and 3rd quarters 2023-24; and**
- 1.2 approve the proposed future management of income from The Commandery's Escape Room.**

2. Information

- 2.1 The appended summary of performance indicators and service plan task completion, together with the information below, gives an account of progress in delivering the work programme against plans and against targets in comparison to the previous five years.
- 2.2 The service continues to show sustained post-Covid recovery across all activity. National Museums, for comparison, have seen an average 27% increase in footfall in 2023 from 2022, but their footfall is still 19% lower on average than in 2019. Some national museums are performing more strongly, including the newly developed National Portrait Gallery and the relaunch of the V&As childhood museum, showing that visitors prioritise seeing redevelopments and new displays.
- 2.3 The County Museum at Hartlebury Castle has performed particularly well, with visitor numbers now averaging 20% above 2019 levels. It is promising to take this site popularity into the planning for the next stage of development for the museum.
- 2.4 The Commandery was awarded Visit England's Gold Visitor Attraction Accolade for the first time in October. This is independently assessed against other visitor attractions via a mystery shopper visit and desk research.
- 2.5 Worcester City Art Gallery's summer exhibition *I Grew Up 80s*, which started on July 8th, gave the venue its highest footfall in July since performance records began. The summer programme now has a reputation for an enjoyable multi-generational experience, which is particularly appealing to local residents.
- 2.6 The Art Gallery's exhibition *Paint the Streets*, running alongside Worcester's Paint Festival, attracted above-average footfall to an autumn show and has only been beaten by Canaletto in that slot. The gallery audience shifted significantly from its traditional audience to be younger and more diverse.

However, secondary spend on retail also shifted to around 15p per head lower than previous autumn exhibitions (although it rallied for Christmas). This is in line with the findings of the Office for National Statistics 'Family spending in the UK' data released in May, which shows that, of those aged 65 to 74, more spend above average on recreation and culture than younger age groups.

A summary of visitor data, including comments, from the *Paint the Streets* exhibition at the Art Gallery & Museum is appended. It is clear that exhibition income and expenditure need to be planned to more closely reflect the aims set out and anticipated audience for each exhibition.

- 2.7 The now many streams of income generation across the service were largely successful, particularly over the summer months. Income targets increased significantly this year and it is very positive that the museum offer continues to satisfy our audience and will meet these increased targets.
- 2.8 The Commandery's Escape Room is part of this successful increase in earned income. The Escape Room has been open for just over a year and has seen 149 bookings, with many bookings coming from across Worcestershire, but also groups visiting from Oxford, Blackpool, Leeds and even Portugal and the USA. It brings a new audience to engage with the historic Commandery site. We have been able to tweak the offer, based on visitor feedback and booking patterns, so that it works in the most efficient and enjoyable way possible.

3. Preferred Option

- 3.1 Any escape room offer relies on periodic development to maintain its success. It is proposed that the service plans for regular investment to redevelop the offer.
- 3.2 It is proposed that, when an end-of-year surplus is made, the surplus generated by the Escape Room above its income target is designated within the museum general reserve, and that this be held to reinvest in the offer every few years.
- 3.3 The performance of the Escape Room will continue to be closely monitored so that the right time to redevelop it can be identified and reported. The designation for the Escape Room in the museum general reserves would be reported as part of ongoing finance reports to this committee.

4. Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 The Escape Room could instead be considered part of the core business and an expenditure budget set for it annually. This would require funding to be removed from other parts of the service and would still present a development challenge as efficient investment needs to be every few years rather than annually.
- 4.2 When the current game in the Escape Room is no longer able to attract new players, the attraction could be retired. This would lose an income stream from the service.

5. Implications

- 5.1 Financial and Budgetary Implications
The proposal is to consider the Escape Room's income above target a little differently from core museum service budgets. The joint museums' reserves arrangement can enable this.

5.2 Legal and Governance Implications

It is not believed there are any legal or governance implications to the proposal. The reserves will continue to be overseen by this committee in line with the joint agreement.

5.3 Risk Implications

Commercial income streams within a local authority service are by their nature at risk of change in audience demand. By enabling periodic investment into the Escape Room, this risk can be lowered.

5.4 Corporate/Policy Implications

It is not believed that there are any corporate or policy implications to the proposal, as it works within the current joint museums agreement regarding reserves.

5.5 Equality Implications

It is not believed that there are any equality implications to the proposal, although any redevelopment will take local community demand and need into account.

5.6 Human Resources Implications

It is not believed that there are any human resources implications to the proposal.

5.7 Health and Safety Implications

It is not believed that there are any health and safety implications to the proposal.

5.8 Social, Environmental and Economic Implications

The Commandery's Escape Room adds to the economic impact and social benefits of Worcester, attracting visitors and local residents.

Ward(s):

All wards

Contact Officer:

Philippa Tinsley, Tel: 01905 25371, email:
philippa.tinsley@worcester.gov.uk

Background Papers:

Appendix 1: MW PIs summary Q2Q3 2023-24
Appendix 2: MW Service Plan Q3 2023-24