

Adult Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Complaints Working Group

Notes from a meeting with Sarah Gray, Curator of Bucks Museum, 20 September 2005

Present: Cllr Bruce Allen
Cllr Hugh Wilson
Cllr Brenda Jennings
Sarah Gray
Clare Capjon

The County Museum in Aylesbury manages and displays collections and information about the County of Buckinghamshire, including Milton Keynes. It has a café and garden area and also hosts the Roald Dahl Gallery. Collections and archive storage is at Halton.

The Museums service uses the Libraries and Heritage compliments, comments and complaints form, although the service receives many unrecorded (verbal) compliments. If forms are handed in to the museum, Sarah will deal with the complaint. If they are sent, they will go to Bob Strong, Head of Libraries and Heritage, before being passed to Sarah for responding on his behalf.

The museum receives around 6-700 enquiries per year. All public enquiries are recorded on the museum's software package, Modes for Windows. This package is also used for the museum's collections and is available on the computer network to all staff on the museum's sites. Modes was chosen as it is more flexible than the County Council's Respond package, however there is a problem in interfacing the two systems as Respond cannot import data. This means that transferring information into the BCC system requires someone to input data manually. An agreement has therefore been made with the corporate complaints team that the museums will action any request from the centre on demand. The museum service has been recording enquiries on the database system since 2002 and sorting information is highly flexible.

The Roald Dahl Children's Gallery (RDCG) is an income generating part of the museum, raising around £100,000 pa. The RDCG has restricted capacity with a maximum of 85 people. Tickets to the RDCG are therefore timed, on an hourly basis.

Comments had been received by the museum that the adult price for the RDCG was too high, considering that it is primarily a children's exhibition. As a result, the museum revised its pricing in the spring this year to equate the adult and child prices at £3.25. This allows an hour in the RDCG, but the museum is now marketing each family visit as more than just the RDCG – an hour in the garden/café area and two hours for looking around the main museum, which has many hands on exhibits. There have been no complaints resulting from the pricing restructure to date.

In July this year a Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre (RDM) was opened in Great Missenden. Members asked about the impact of this museum on the Gallery. In July the RDCG experienced a 40% increase in tickets which has been attributed to the publicity surrounding the opening of the Missenden RDM and during the summer there were days when some sessions were fully booked. The County Museum concentrated a considerable amount of effort on customer management at the time and has been monitoring the situation closely. The museum is developing links with the RDM and both acknowledge they have a separate and complementary place in the market – with the RDM being more for older children and adults and the RDCG more appropriate for the younger age range. As a result the museum is noticing a change in the pattern of school visits and is beginning to suggest that schools visit the RDM in the morning and the RDCG in the afternoon. This would also ease the museum's difficulty with providing adequate lunchtime space for children.

The museum itself is free, to encourage and improve access to services. The museum did have a period when it charged an entry fee, but this resulted in a significant reduction in the numbers of

visitors (falling to 52,000, compared with 148,000 in 2004/5). Of the visitors attending the museum last year, 33,000 tickets were sold to the RDCG.

Physical signage to the museum has been a cause for complaint and the museum is working with Lynda Baker, Libraries & Heritage Quality and Marketing Manager and the Town Centre Partnership to address this. Other complaints received by the service tend to focus mainly on RDCG (overpricing, booking times, things not working) which Sarah felt reflects the fact that this is the only part of the service which visitors pay for. As a result of some complaints made in 2004 that the RDCG's exhibits were not working, staff now ensure that these are working at all times. September is the time when the RDCG has an annual maintenance overhaul. A member asked if there had been any demand for developing the RDCG further. The museum has received no public demand for change (which would also require capital funding). There is a need for smaller scale updating for a facility opened in 1996, notably ICT.

The museum currently provides a telephone booking service for the RDCG. This is likely to be taken over by the Customer First Contact Centre in 2006. The museum is currently discussing how this would operate to ensure that service provision to users is at least maintained. At present the museum offers a telephone booking service 7 days/week including Bank Holidays – and the service is keen to ensure visitors still have this level of access after the transfer. There are developments too around the use of online booking, which would enable visitors to pre-book tickets themselves. The service hopes to learn from the adult learning service in this respect.

The museum service has three BVPIs on which it is judged (170 a,b,c). The first is around the number of visitors, the second around the number of website hits, and the third relates to the number of school visitors. In addition there are a number of developing environment and cultural indicators in the Local Area Agreement that the service could contribute towards and it is therefore vital that the museum is able to maintain contact with its customers.

The museum is looking to develop better links with Aylesbury town and opportunities that the town centre redevelopment could offer, for example a Victorian trail around the town taking in the canal basin, Kings Head and the museum. The museum is now creating displays and exhibitions for multiple audiences including adults rather than focusing on child-centred exhibits. In addition, the museum is restarting the Buckinghamshire Museums Network, with the other voluntary, charitable and District Council run museums in the County. This enables the County museum to develop links outside Aylesbury and should improve access to collections. The museum also recognises the need to develop web-based information about the collections and exhibits it holds.

A member asked about whether there had been any complaints regarding donations to the museum. The museum staff understand the need to manage expectations around donations. Storage is limited and the County Council's Cabinet agreed an acquisitions and disposals policy in 2001 which means that the museum cannot collect beyond its resources and defined priorities. Acquisitions are taken in trust for the public and the museum has a responsibility for taking care of them as a result. Occasionally the museum considers it important that an item is paid for, and in this case will work to raise funds accordingly, possibly through public appeals.