

<i>COMMITTEE</i>	REGENERATION AND COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
<i>DATE</i>	1 MAY 2002
<i>TITLE OF REPORT</i>	THE CHARLES DICKENS CENTRE
<i>RESPONSIBLE OFFICER</i>	Simon Curtis, tourism and retail sector manager

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform members of the operation, performance and issues relating to the Charles Dickens Centre.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 Members are advised to note the contents of this report and are informed that a study will be commissioned to address options for the future of the Centre, analysing the costs and benefits of alternative options for the building.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Charles Dickens Centre is located in Eastgate House, a delightful Elizabethan Grade 1 Listed building on Rochester's historic High Street. The house was built in about 1590 as the home of Sir Peter Buck - Clerk of the Cheque at Chatham Dockyard and one time Alderman and Mayor of the City of Rochester.
- 3.2 More recently the house was home to the museum of Rochester, until 1979 (when the museum moved to the Guildhall) and the Dickens Centre was created in its place. In the early 1980's, it was considered to be an innovative and "state-of-the-art" visitor attraction. The centre employs tableaux and lighting effects, accompanied by audio readings by leading actors, to bring to life not only the characters and scenes from Dickens' novels but also much of the grim reality of Victorian England. It was last upgraded in 1996 with the installation of the "Dickens Dream" tableaux.
- 3.3 The centre was managed by the museum service until April 1998 when it was transferred to the leisure arts and libraries directorate. In April 2001 the service was transferred in to the new economic development and neighbourhood renewal division of the development and environment directorate.

4. RATIONALE

- 4.1 Eastgate House has been in Council ownership for a number of decades. It is a very special and unique building and an important part of Medway's historic fabric. The Dickens Centre visitor attraction has now been open for 23 years, during which there has only been one significant refurbishment/update. It is now an appropriate time to be reviewing options for the future use of the attraction, and the building.

5. REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE

- 5.1 The key performance information over the last five years is tabulated below.

	1997/8	1999/2000	2001/02
Visitor Numbers	46,274	33,704	25,797
% School Visits	35%	35%	35%
Total Ticket Income	£78,271	£70,688	£56,185
Total Shop Income	£37,288	£31,271	£22,446
Total Revenue	£115,559	£101,959	£78,631
Avg Spend/head	£2.49	£3.02	£3.04
Avg Ticket Spend/head	£1.69	£2.09	£2.17
Avg Shop Spend/head	£0.80	£0.92	£0.87
Net Cost to Council (outturn)*	£141,000**	£154,000	£122,000

NB: Figs are net of VAT

- Excluding cost of sales on shop

** Estimate

- 5.2 During the past five years there has been a significant 44% decline in admissions whilst revenue has fallen by 32%.
- 5.3 Despite this, operating costs have been gradually cut back over this period, such that the net outturn to the Council has actually been reduced. The reductions in staffing and marketing, though, have inevitably and adversely affected the visitor levels and service.
- 5.4 Whilst appreciating the Dickens Centre has been under performing it is relevant to take into account the national/regional visitor trends as well as reviewing the centre's development and management history during this period.
- 5.5 Between 1999 and 2000 the 3,400 UK visitor attractions reported an average downward trend of -2%. In England most tourist board regions reported a decline in visits, with attractions in London (- 4%), Cumbria (- 4%) and the South East of England (- 3%) experiencing the largest declines in 2000. Despite a good long-term prognosis for tourism generally, the visitor attractions sector is becoming increasingly competitive and over-saturated.

- 5.6 In 1997 the Tourist Information Centre was relocated from Eastgate Cottage to its present location on Rochester High Street, thereby reducing the flow of passers-by for the Dickens Centre and casual visitors to the attraction.
- 5.7 Between 1998 and 2001 the marketing budget for the Centre was gradually reduced which contributed to the continuing decline in visitor numbers.

6. SWOT ANALYSIS

6.1 The key strengths of the Centre are:

- splendid Elizabethan building.
- main thoroughfare location
- educational appeal - national curriculum links.
- world famous character.
- overseas appeal.

6.2 The main weaknesses of the Dickens Centre are:

- very low key signing on to the High Street - easy to pass by and not notice that it is a visitor attraction;
- difficult to tell from the outside what is on the inside;
- exhibitions in need of investment;
- limitations of Grade 1 Listed building;
- no on-site toilets;
- no catering;
- access and circulation for the disabled is often difficult.

6.3 Opportunities to enhance the attraction could be:

- a change of name to better reflect content;
- an exterior display to indicate the nature of the attraction;
- to make more use of education and meeting room for small meetings and hospitality;
- enhancement of the gardens such that they become a core part of the visitor experience.

6.4 Major threats to improving performance are:

- the decline in visitor numbers generally to themed heritage attractions;
- financial pressures on Council;
- vagrants and drunks loitering outside toilets and in gardens;
- possibility of a new "Dickens World" attraction at Chatham Maritime (see later).

7. CRITICAL ISSUES

- 7.1 Lack of re-investment in the product has left a rather dated visitor attraction that, despite some charming elements, is no longer fulfilling customer expectations.
- 7.2 The building has a significant maintenance backlog, estimated by the property section at £400,000.
- 7.3 The gardens are now habitually used (mainly overnight but also during the day) by local vagrants. The staff are regularly faced with the unpleasant task of cleaning up the litter and mess left by the vagrants and there have been several occasions where visitors have been verbally abused. In addition, skateboarders have damaged the planting in the alleyway leading into the gardens and there has been evidence of drug taking in the area.

8. PLANS AND FORECAST FOR 2002/3

- 8.1 The budgeted net operating cost to the Council (outturn) for the Centre is of the order of £102,000 in 2002/3, reflecting additional operational savings and stabilisation of visitor numbers.
- 8.2 The tourism and retail unit have put a new business plan in operation which will seek to reduce the cost to the Council, though the experience of the last five years suggests that expectations should be realistic.
- 8.3 In the region of £5,000 is being made available from the Tourism Action Plan budget to enhance the Centre's own limited marketing and maintenance budget and to undertake some essential improvements.
- 8.4 The marketing actions include a new promotional leaflet, enhanced promotion in regional tourism publications, familiarisation evenings for local hoteliers and some public relations work
- 8.5 Increased efforts are being made to work with local schools and improve the educational package offered to visiting school groups.
- 8.6 In terms of physical improvements, a series of additional actions are being implemented in order to create the conditions in which the Centre can at least not lose any further ground. These include the development of a higher profile on to High Street (new sign), transmitting piped Victorian music from the entrance, new stock and improved presentation in the shop, high pressure jet washing of the lower walls and paving and some essential repair work.
- 8.7 The temporary closure of the gardens (from the alleyway) is being considered, with entry in to the gardens (free) only possible via the Dickens Centre. This would gain more footfall through the shop and will also allow the gardens to be protected from vandalism and vagrancy problems. It may be possible to install temporary exhibitions in the education room which is passed en route to the gardens. If the vagrancy problem is removed, the unit is prepared to invest limited funds into further improvements in the garden.

- 8.8 Should the vagrancy problem be solved, there would be merit in considering a total restoration of the gardens and perhaps a re-creation of a Victorian garden.
- 8.9 The improvement works are all in keeping with any longer term strategy for the building. It is suggested that any savings made over the next two years (from trading returns over and above the targets which have been set) are ring-fenced to allow for the investment needed to secure the long-term future use of the building.

9. LONG TERM OPTIONS

- 9.1 In 2004, the attraction will be 25 years old. This is now an appropriate time to consider the future of the attraction and, ultimately the building. While a number of ideas have been suggested, the options have yet to be analysed in terms of suitability, cost and risk.
- 9.2 There is a proposal for a new Dickens themed visitor attraction (Dickens World) at Chatham Maritime on the site next to the Factory Outlet Centre. SEEDA are currently considering detailed plans for the venture. Though the plans were announced in November 2001, no planning application has been forthcoming as yet. However, we understand that the project promoters are still actively progressing the proposal.
- 9.3 One physical improvement which could accompany any new use would be the removal of the lower storey extension (between the two main buildings) in order to open up the gardens and chalet to the High Street.
- 9.4 If the Centre is to remain a visitor attraction, considerable re-investment will be required in order to refresh and re-invent the exhibition such that the Centre can return to the trading performance levels of the mid 1990s. The exhibition is currently too passive and will need to be re-created with more dynamic and interactive content.
- 9.5 If a new use is to be found for the Centre, a number of options will need to be considered such as:
- the return of the building to its museum roots, perhaps by establishing a genuine Dickens literary centre. This would allow stronger community links to be established and is likely to attract the attention of the emerging University of Medway;
 - conversion to use as office space either for the Council or for a professional firm; or
 - use as a prestige functions and meetings venue.
- 9.6 It is the intention of the tourism and retail unit to commission an options appraisal in order to assess the likely costs, benefits, risks and rewards of all possible options.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Under Section 144 of the Local Government Act 1972, Medway Council is empowered to encourage persons to visit the area for purposes of recreation and tourism.
- 10.2 The services are also in accordance with the Council's power to promote and improve the economic well-being of its area under section 2 of the Local Government Act 2000.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 2.2 Fully costed options for the Dickens Centre will be developed as part of the consultants' report. The commissioning of the report is likely to cost in the region of £10,000 and will be paid from the 2002/3 Tourism Action Plan budget.

For further information please contact:

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