

HEELIS & LODGE

Local Council Services • Internal Audit

Report on Oliver Cromwell House and TIC, Ely City Council – 2020/2021

This report was written following a meeting with the Manager of the Oliver Cromwell House and Tourist Information Centre. The following recommendations/observations have been made:

Since the last visit Covid and subsequent lockdowns have had a significant impact on the plans and aspirations identified last year, particularly financially, stalling the implementation of the development of the business to achieve sustainability.

Despite the periods of closure due to lockdown this has not stopped the Manager from adapting to enhance the visitor experience and increase collaboration and build relationships with local businesses.

It is a positive move to see that when the restrictions are finally lifted the appointment for a member of staff to oversee the finance can go forward.

Volunteer management

The volunteers have been an important part of the adaptation to continue to operate during the Covid restrictions through thinking creatively as a team, bringing new ideas, walks and experiences to promote and maximise visitor numbers. The 'Walks with a Difference' programme has been a great success.

Meeting the Covid challenge

Whilst the main events had to be cancelled due to Covid, the Manager and her team have found different and innovative ways to engage businesses and visitors alike. The ability to seize opportunities as and when they arise is a strength that the team embraces.

The Escape Room has been able to continue to run when the OCH has been open, adapting to the restrictions. The town centre initiative 'Ely's Independent Hamper' was very successful and well received by independent traders and the Ghost Tour and Witchcraft Tour had a very positive response. New tours are being developed for 2021 including 'Tour of Old Ely Inns' and an Artists Trail.

October tours and events were fully booked and were able to go ahead just prior to the second lockdown, as was the Heritage Open Days in September, albeit viewing was outside only due to restrictions. To accompany the Heritage weekend, the production of a very informative guide book enabled visitors to enjoy the experience.

Events that took place over the Heritage weekend:

- Open House at OCH with film
- Exposure of the 16th Century wall art
- Roundheads re-enactment group
- Tours of Ely Cemetery
- Talk on the Sessions House court room
- Heritage Eel and Riverside Trail
- House Detective Tours
- Architectural Walk

Another initiative and good example of partnership working, this time with the museum, was the production of Mrs Cromwell's Cookbook which features the OCH kitchen on the front cover. There are plans to sell the cookbook in the shop.

A successful bid for £25,000 from the Culture Recovery Fund has been secured to produce family and adult video tours.

A new Signs and Symbols Tour was launched in September 2020 which gained positive feedback. The use of online surveys has provided valuable information gathering for analysis as has the data collected on each of the different events/tours that are run. Statistics are also now being kept regarding Facebook posts, Twitter, Instagram and the website. The Marketing Officer monitors social media statistics.

Manager reports to the Council are comprehensive and thorough, including the financial reporting.

The Visitor Guide 2021 has generated an increase in advertising resulting in an estimated profit of around £5,000 on the publication.

Plans for the future

- Friends of Oliver Cromwell's House is a new initiative that will be developed in 2021 which will have an international reach.
- Online virtual treasure hunt/Escape Room sessions.
- Opening of an online shop.
- Collaboration with the Maltings regarding trails and tours.
- Relaunch of House Detectives.
- Signs and Symbols Tours.
- Boat Race – 4 April 2021.
- Eel weekend – 5/6 June 2021.
- Food & Drink Festival – 28/29 August 2021.
- Apple Festival – 16 October 2021.
- Continue to build partnership working with business and other organisations

Summary and recommendations

The team have not only coped extremely well in what has been a very challenging year, but embraced the changes and restrictions to bring new visitor experiences. Their enthusiasm and passion for the job is commendable and the team effort brings tangible results under good leadership.

The Service Plan has been updated and indicates a clear direction, aims and objectives with a timescale that, subject to Covid, appears achievable. The team is constantly looking forward so that as and when life returns to some sort of normal, they are ready to go.

Recommendations:

None.



Heather Heelis
Heelis & Lodge

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