

Blackfriars Priory Business Plan 2023-2028



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Blackfriars is one of the most complete surviving friaries of Dominican ‘black friars’ in England.” – English Heritage.

In 2012, Gloucester City Council saw an opportunity to add to Gloucester’s cultural offer and took the bold step in taking on the management of the 13th Century priory. With no immediate plan, and little resource, the only way was up... right?

Fast-forward and 10 years later, Blackfriars is a venue offering weddings, concerts, exhibitions, guided tours, filming, educational events, and private hires. Blackfriars continues to dominate the wedding industry with local, regional, national, and international accolades, more recently winning ‘Wedding Venue of the Year 2023’ at the South-West Tourism Awards.

THE PLAN

The aim of this plan is to describe the growth journey for Blackfriars for the next 5 years. It will:

- Set out the aims and objectives for the next 5 years from 2023-2028.
- Describe how Blackfriars will meet the aims and objectives.
- Outline the resource needed to deliver the aims and objectives.
- Provide a financial overview of each year.
- Share our ambition and raise the profile of Blackfriars.

OUR FUTURE

Following a successful 10-year lease, Gloucester City Council is about to embark on a 25-year tenancy of Blackfriars, an important step for partners, stakeholders, visitors, residents, and the city.

Commercial activity continues to be essential for financial sustainability of the venue. We will raise our income and tackle our costs. We will be ambitious, creative, innovative, and ethical in diversifying our income streams, balanced with our environmental responsibilities. Cultural activity opportunities are endless, with our commercial grip allowing for increased cultural engagement.

Blackfriars is ready for the next stage of its development. It is ready to enter its next phase of its journey – one that is focused on building audience and customer-base, commercialisation and future sustainability leading to a business model that will see a reduction of public subsidy annually.

We must acknowledge our past but focus on our future.

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY

Blackfriars – where did it begin?

Gloucester Blackfriars was founded in 1239 on a site that had once been part of a Norman Castle. The friars were of the Dominican order and acted as teachers and evangelists, and they would travel around the countryside or live together in urban friaries. The monks that lived at Blackfriars had to take on traditional monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and attended church nine times a day. King Henry III then became a major benefactor and patron of the friary and made the decision to grant timber for the roofs from the nearby Forest of Dean and royal forests in Shropshire and Dorset. Much of the original scissor-braced roof trusses and timber for the floors in the South Range can still be seen today.

The friary continued throughout the next two centuries. A cemetery was discovered in 1991 indicating that Blackfriars may have been operating as a hospital.

The South Range floor is said to have 'outstanding significance' and is the only building in England to demonstrate construction by the friars of how they made their houses into centres of study and learning. The South Range remains largely intact. The library was built on the first floor where study cubicles were lit by small windows. The building is regarded as the oldest surviving purpose-built library in the country.

In the early sixteenth century, the house was in decline. It was bought by Thomas Bell who was the mayor of Gloucester and a wealthy Gloucester capper and clothier. He remodelled the church, converting it into a cloth manufactory, creating 300 jobs.

1960 saw the building restored by English Heritage and has since been under their care.



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CURRENT DAY

Blackfriars operates as a commercially run business and is an important cultural asset to Gloucester. Before 2012, the site was closed to the public except for private tours provided by the Civic Trust. Since 2012, visitor numbers have grown significantly with increases in footfall seen annually.

Blackfriars offers a banqueting capacity of 150 with the North Range accommodating up to 300 standing and 230 seated. The East Range can accommodate up to 80 people and the enclosed private cloister garden offers a relaxing, tranquil outdoor space. The Scriptorium has been used as an event space for several events which has allowed spaces of the site to be opened and utilised that aren't generally open to the public. The availability of multiple hire spaces has been attractive for larger events with varying logistics.

The historical nature, mixed with the flexibility of spaces and stunning architecture has allowed Blackfriars to become a multi-use venue, attracting a range of visitors to the site through weddings, private hires, internally programmed events, as a visitor attraction and for educational engagement.

Blackfriars has played host to several annual large events:

- Gloucester History Festival, the city's flagship event attracting high profile speakers.
- CAMRA Beer Festival attracting a varied demographic.
- Underground Festival location attracting a younger audience.
- Lantern procession base for schools and community groups.

Blackfriars has really started to consider where it is positioning itself in the event space industry which has seen the team embark on new marketing initiatives and working with influencers to bolster the venues reputation.

As an important cultural asset to Gloucester, Blackfriars relies on its commercial activity to enable it to increase its level of creativity and engagement – a area that will see growth in the next 5 years.



MISSION, VISION, & VALUES

MISSION

Blackfriars will build on its fantastic reputation as a stunning historical site, to educate, engage, and inspire whilst becoming a financially viable and sustainable venue.

VISION

The jewel in Gloucester's heritage crown.

VALUES

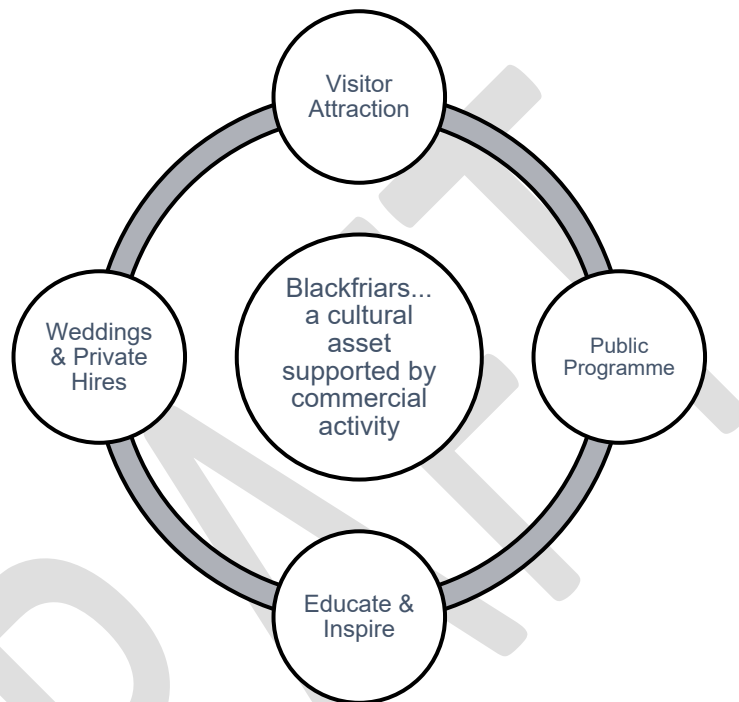
As a Gloucester City Council managed venue, it's important to recognise the values that are embedded in day-to-day activity:

- Efficiency and value for money
- Forward thinking with innovation
- Making residents lives better
- Passionate about the City
- Working together to make it happen

Blackfriars - we only deliver **excellence**. We think and dream big, we are bold, creative, **innovative** and embrace new opportunities. We don't take for granted the stories hidden within the walls. We will share, **inspire**, and champion Blackfriars as a place to learn. We will continue to grow, this only being possible with the right **passion** and talent.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES

This business plan is about the future ambitions of Blackfriars and is built around 4 keys areas of work. They are designed to work together to achieve our mission of educating, engaging and inspiring, whilst protecting the financial viability of the venue. Each of these 4 keys areas will contribute to the financial sustainability of the venue.



AIM 1 – Blackfriars will be the first choice when tying the knot

Blackfriars will be the wedding venue that couples dream of for their special day and will be known for providing a high-end, luxurious, quality offer – allowing the history of Gloucester to play a special part of their day.

AIM 2 - We will turn up the volume on Blackfriars profile and position locally, regionally, and nationally

Blackfriars will be the sought-after backdrop for hosting and programming a diverse range of local, regional, and national events at the highest level of quality and will spark curious audiences into the venue.

AIM 3 - Blackfriars will become a site of hands-on learning, storytelling, and reflection

Blackfriars will help young people understand their roles as citizens, the importance of heritage buildings and the history of Gloucester.

AIM 4 – Blackfriars is a space to enjoy Gloucester’s history and heritage

Everyone will be able to access Blackfriars and enjoy new experiences through its visitor attraction offer

AIM 1 – Blackfriars will be the first choice when tying the knot

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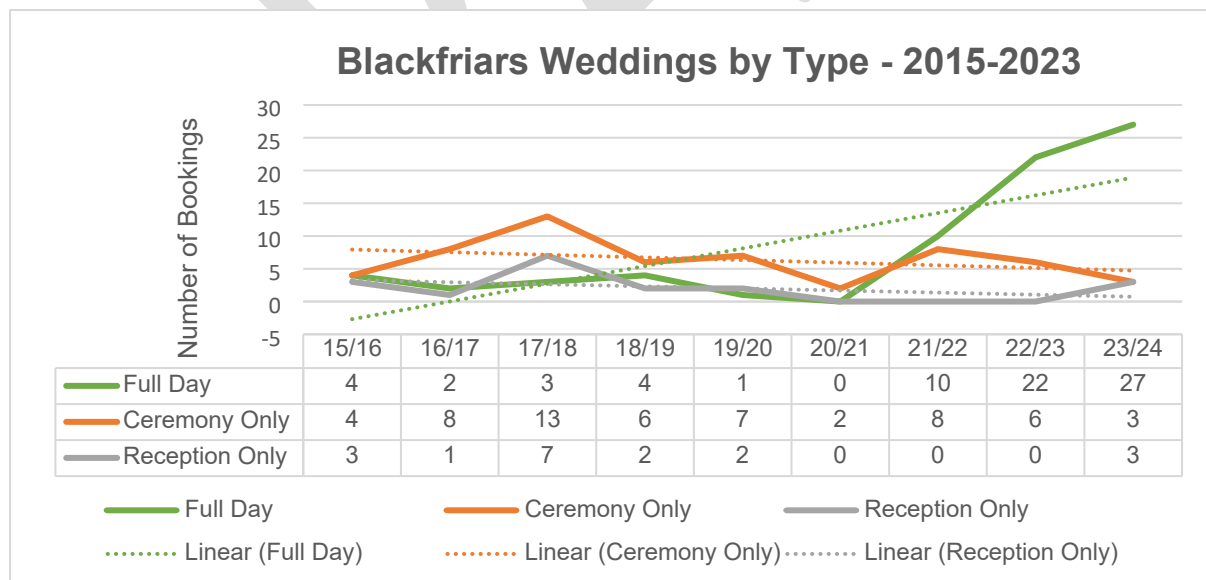
REFLECTING...

2012 saw the very first couple tie the knot at Blackfriars. With little experience in the wedding industry and a lack of internal catering facilities, along with no dedicated resource, it was a risk, but Blackfriars did have one obvious USP – the unrivalled features of the 65ft scissor-braced ceiling, displaying its original 13th century oak beams – the wow factor that captivates you the moment you enter.

The first ceremony only wedding was a success and there was soon greater interest in Blackfriars as a venue. Ceremony only bookings started to increase, leading to wedding receptions and eventually full day weddings.

During the earlier years of the lease agreement with English Heritage, the team were still understanding how to best utilise the different spaces and focused on smaller scale weddings and events. Partnerships were soon created with local catering companies and a bar was built. A small, dedicated team was formed in March 2020, just before the worldwide pandemic which saw weddings cancelled, eventually returning with a smaller number of guests in summer 2020 until social distancing was removed in July 2021, which is when the venue started to recover.

Full day wedding bookings have since seen a significant increase, with ceremony and reception only bookings reducing in number.



Blackfriars as a wedding venue has come a long way since 2012 and the level of growth at the venue has been demonstrated by achieving the gold award for **‘Wedding Venue of the Year’** at the South-West Tourism Awards in 2023, beating Cornish castles, luxury hotels and historical properties across the region.

THE NEXT 5 YEARS...

Weddings are currently the most lucrative strand of the business and generates the highest level of income. We need to exploit Blackfriars USP to continue to generate the vital income that is needed to bring down the level of investment currently provided by Gloucester City Council. 2023 is the turning point in creating a sustainable business model that allows the venue to start the journey of breaking even, with ambitions of becoming a profitable business in the future.

Blackfriars will continue to grow its wedding offer, maximising peak periods to generate maximum income. Benchmarking with other local wedding venues is essential in setting the right price to remain attractive and competitive, whilst also acknowledging that Blackfriars is in the middle of a city, next to a busy public car park – different to many other scenic venues.

Membership of online directories has proved successful with enquiries coming in faster than they can be dealt with. Online partnerships with Hitched, Bridebook, UK Bride and Coco to name a few has put Blackfriars alongside some of the best wedding venues in the UK. By continuing to work with online partners and ensuring that our selected suppliers align with our values and vision, bookings will increase year on year.

Moving into the next 5 years, Blackfriars will focus on increasing the number of full day weddings as the financial return is higher than ceremony-only weddings. Blackfriars continues to be perfectly based to hold wedding receptions for those who want a religious based ceremony. By the end of 2028, Blackfriars has a stretch target of delivering 50 weddings a year but will need to react to the local and regional landscape as well as industry-trends. Blackfriars will continue to deliver a customer focused experience that exceeds all expectations.

Weddings leads the commercial strand of the business, enabling the venue to open to the public as a visitor attraction, to attend events and be a place to learn and will therefore continue to be the primary source of income.

KEY ACTIVITY...

- Analysis of the return on investment of our online directory partnerships is essential, understanding where leads are coming from, how Blackfriars is being portrayed and the conversion rates.
- Increase the use of digital tools to allow couples to immerse themselves in the early stages of their planning and how digital technology can allow couples to invite a greater number of guests – i.e., use of live streaming, virtual reality, drone footage and online booking.
- Partner with authentic, customer focused caterers whose values aligns with those of Blackfriars – specifically those around innovation and excellence.
- Identify new partners within the accommodation and experience sectors to further enhance the Blackfriars weddings offer.
- Undertake a customer journey mapping exercise to understand the touch points, ensuring that Blackfriars screams quality at every point.

AIM 2 - We will turn up the volume on Blackfriars profile and position locally, regionally, and nationally.

Blackfriars will be the sought-after backdrop for hosting and programming a diverse range of local, regional, and national events at the highest level of quality and will spark curious audiences into the venue

REFLECTING...

The Blackfriars team have been creative with the spaces available within the lease arrangements. Each space individually tells a story but being able to combine spaces for breakout sessions, green rooms, for different aspects of an event or wedding enables greater flexibility and is an attractive offer for those events requiring multiple spaces. The garden is a surprise to anyone visiting the site, with infrastructure in place to successfully deliver outdoor events as previously seen with the Guildhall Presents programme.

Blackfriars is a sought-after location. It's story, setting and historical significance continues to attract large scale events. Blackfriars is home to the annual Gloucester History Festival which attracts nationally known literary speakers. The Gloucester CAMRA Beer Festival has been a resident of Blackfriars for several years and is the perfect location for ale and cider tasting with live music taking place outdoors. Vegan Markets, Music Festivals, Gin Festivals and Wellbeing events will regularly be seen taking place at Blackfriars. Christmas parties are also increasing in number with all peak dates selling out each winter. Blackfriars has quickly become a year-round sought-after venue.

Blackfriars is seen as an exclusive, high-end film and photoshoot location. Collaboration with national businesses and award-winning photographers has exposed Blackfriars to the world. Powerful, professional imagery has put Blackfriars in the best possible place to position itself amongst the best.

There have been many successes with the internal programme. Partnerships with the Glevum Big Band, Museum of Gloucester and 'Don't Go Into the Cellar' Theatre Company has allowed spaces to be tested, demand to be assessed and partnerships to be built to allow future growth. The team aren't afraid to take risks with the Scriptorium being used to trial new events. 'Scriptorium – A Medieval Cocktail Emporium' allowed for visitors to be transported back in time to the 13thC for a Medieval themed cocktail bar. Teaming up with local caterers and marketed as an exclusive, not to be missed unique event attracted new audiences and allowed us to test the Scriptorium as an events space. These events have screamed quality but testing out spaces hasn't generated significant income but has increased audiences to Blackfriars. With such a small team whose resource has been directed at weddings and hires, the number of internally programmed events have been low with 7-8 events taking place each year over the last couple of years.

There is significant room for growth of the internal programme. The demand for corporate hires and weddings draws on the limited resource available but the potential of the internal programme is exciting. A passionate and creative team, the stunning spaces available and investment in equipment and furniture to support the internal programme, shows there is great potential.



THE NEXT 5 YEARS...

Blackfriars will continue to sell its spaces for private hire use. The venue is perfectly located in the city centre with excellent transport links and adjacent car parking. Individual meeting spaces, allows the team to generate essential income whilst continuing to maintain and set up the site for other events. Building relationships with the meetings and conference industry, provides regular income through repeat bookings which can even lead on to Christmas party bookings.

Building relationships with larger festival and event organisers is critical as creating new partners at a local, regional, and national level will increase activity at Blackfriars and will showcase Blackfriars as a national venue to hire. Although larger events require increased resource during the period of activity, multi-day events require far less resource in the set up and breakdown periods therefore increasing profit margins.

Private hires can generate a good level of income over the space of a year and can contribute significantly to the year-end position. Blackfriars will increase the number of hires on an annual basis and will start to hire out multiple spaces concurrently to maximise income.

With weddings and hires generating vital income, the internal programme will become a priority. Experimenting with different types of events has allowed Blackfriars to understand the capabilities of the venue and identify the types of events that are profitable versus those that increase awareness of the venue.

Our public events programme will become stronger with a focus on quality and uniqueness. There are opportunities for growth in widening the level of engagement with the internal programme. We want our visitors to return and take part in the programme more regularly so building the audience is a critical part of this aim. Growth in this area will take time but will increase each year. Cultivating relationships with theatre groups and circus companies will attract a wider audience and continuing to identify new partners that aligns with Blackfriars slightly more edgy programming aspirations, will continue to attract a broader audience. Visitor attraction open days will start to see more regular programmed activity to draw in more visitors to the site.

These activities will drive us to understand and develop our audiences and to target those who have limited access to cultural experiences in Gloucester.

KEY ACTIVITY...

- Produce an audience development plan to widen participation through the Blackfriars programme.
- Programme a vibrant and diverse range of events based on current testing to date whilst taking bold decisions to expand the number of internally programmed events.
- Include the Scriptorium and rear courtyard into the lease to enable a year-round programmable space, acknowledging the sensitivity and importance of the Scriptorium.
- Expand the footprint of Blackfriars to the south to include the side alley, enabling an additional access point to the site to allow multiple events to take place successfully.
- Increase the number of private hirers year-round, creating Christmas party packages and promoting quieter periods to increase footfall onsite.
- Build national partnerships to bring higher profile events to Blackfriars – boosting the local economy.

AIM 3 - Blackfriars will become a site of hands-on learning, storytelling, and reflection.

Blackfriars will help young people understand their roles as citizens, the importance of heritage buildings and the history of Gloucester.

REFLECTING...

Blackfriars is an important asset in the teaching of medieval history in Gloucester. We know that Blackfriars can enhance the learning of our local schools and educational institutes.

The creation of an education programme was always important but taking on a site with limited resource, limited infrastructure and limited skills in this area resulted in other activity taking precedence. However, with a small level of resource, in 2013, several education sessions were designed:

- Life in a Medieval Priory
- Archaeological Detectives
- Tudor Life at Bell's Place

These sessions were aimed at schools, home learning groups, brownies, guide, and scout groups as well as youth and church groups. Educational sessions were booked, and feedback was positive. As staffing changed, and resource continued to be limited in the earlier part of the lease agreement, education bookings were more reactive rather than taking a proactive approach. The ambition was always to do more and do better and although activity did take place, it wasn't growing to the level that we had originally aspired it to be.

Following the pandemic, Cultural Recovery Funding allowed for the creation of several resources to support our educational obligations. These resources include:

- Creation of the 'Blackfriars Priory Education Box' with an associated object guide
- Key stage 1 – Local History Study / Key stage 2 – Medieval Blackfriars
- Activity sheets for all key stages and a teacher self-guided tour

These resources have been developed by a learning outside the classroom educator in partnership with the Museum of Gloucester and are currently available however, due to limited engagement resource, these assets have not been utilised as originally planned although they do provide a good foundation for development of the educational offer.

Blackfriars has also previously struggled to take pro-active action to engage with schools and other education providers and fulfil the needs of the lease agreement. If the team aren't coordinating weddings, setting up for hires and working events, they are assisting with the essential upkeep of the building.

In partnership with the Museum of Gloucester, Blackfriars has been the location for Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF), ensuring that children and young people are entertained, active, educated, safe and fed through the school holidays. This has been successful, drawing new younger visitors to Blackfriars whilst supporting the community.

Blackfriars has so much potential to inspire the younger generation and has many exciting stories to tell. The foundations are in place, the building is available, the English Heritage website has a wealth of suggested activities that could be utilised to compliment the educational programme, the one thing missing is the resource – someone to manage and coordinate the activity.

THE NEXT 5 YEARS...

Gloucester City Council is committed to delivering the educational strand of the agreement. The foundations are in place and with the archive full of historical assets, Blackfriars can become a safe space to learn and inspire future generations.

Blackfriars is an important asset in the teaching of medieval history in Gloucester. Medieval learning takes place across KS1, KS2 and KS3, and covers a lengthy historical era between 1066 and 1485 which is where Blackfriars can play a key role in Gloucester in educating our young people.

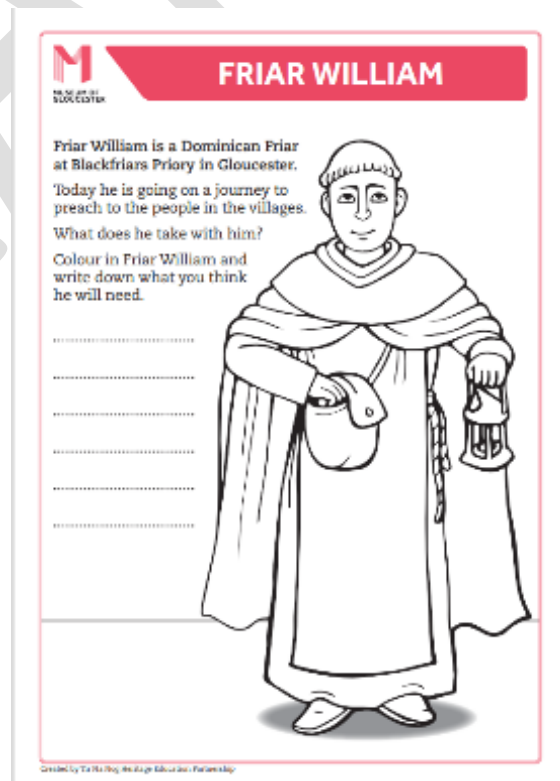
Blackfriars links to the quality mark under Ofsted for Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural development and requires schools to think about the kind of people we aspire to be, the kind of world we aspire to create and the kind of education we aspire to provide.

We want to build better connections with schools in Gloucester and further afield and we want to see Blackfriars filled with children who are here to learn. Sharing the history of Blackfriars is important. We want to tell future generations that they are standing on a site with thousands of years of recorded human history, that where Blackfriars now stands was once a Norman Castle, that they can still see evidence of the use of the building after the Friars had left and most significantly, that we hold the keys to the oldest library in the country.

It's not just schools that we need to engage with, all the groups we previously engaged with are important.

KEY ACTIVITY...

- Undertake a feasibility study to employ a part time staff member to host heritage visits and develop community programmes.
- Direct educational activity to Mondays and Tuesdays to allow for commercial activity to take place later in the week, enabling a consistent and safe space.
- Deliver activity to Church of England schools, secular schools, and Beaver/Scout groups. This will increase annually as relationships are formed.
- Through the Museum of Gloucester partnership, Blackfriars will be a location for the Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF), and a safe outdoor space for Museum engagement.
- Research and identify funding opportunities to further enhance the education offer.
- Open discussions on offering all age public learning including research projects and academic interest.



AIM 4 – Blackfriars is a space to enjoy Gloucester’s history and heritage

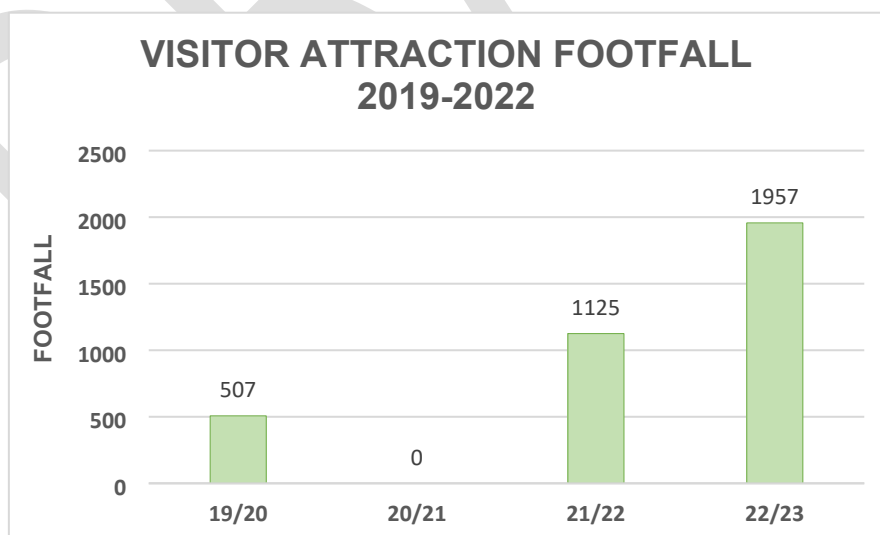
Everyone will be able to access Blackfriars and enjoy new experiences.

REFLECTING...

In the earlier days of the lease arrangement, Blackfriars opened on Sundays from April to September for bookable tours only through a partnership with the Gloucester Civic Trust who delivered tours to the public. The venue didn't have any other public access and the only way to see the beauty of the site was if you were attending an event that an external hirer has organised.

The visitor attraction side to Blackfriars was always the exciting part of the venue. Telling the stories of the monks, showing the engravings in the Scriptorium and the yearning to see jaws drop in the North Range was the desired ambition but always ended up further down the list of priorities due the commercial activities taking precedence. Mid-2017 saw a change where capacity grew, and Blackfriars was able to open every Sunday and Monday between April and September. 2020 saw no visitors to Blackfriars due to the pandemic with the doors reopening in April 2021. At the end of the 2021 season, a commitment was made to open Blackfriars year-round on a Sunday and Monday, extending to Tuesdays in January 2022. The introduction of the core Blackfriars team in 2020 enabled increased opening as staff were present onsite.

Visitor numbers on attraction days have been low, with a maximum of 20 people on a day without any planned activity. Those days where there has been programmed activity, visitor numbers have increased significantly. Except for the pandemic, visitor numbers to the site have increased over the past 4 years.



Although growth in this area has been lower than originally hoped, the introduction of a donation station, a visitor guidebook and the development of an audio tour has set some good foundations for future growth of this part of the business.

THE NEXT 5 YEARS...

Blackfriars will continue to be an accessible facility for residents and visitors to enjoy. It is vital that everyone can see Blackfriars. Blackfriars plays a key role in telling the story of Gloucester and its medieval history.

Blackfriars will open every Sunday to the public. One Sunday a month will see programmed activity taking place to encourage footfall into Blackfriars. Programmed activity has seen footfall numbers quadruple and has proven to be successful. Activity could include music, family crafts and entertainment and seasonal events to name a few. Bookable products including tours and events will generate necessary income and the audio tour and refreshments will enhance the visitor experience.

Guided tours will be reintroduced in conjunction with city partners and will be an important partnership in delivering our visitor attraction ambition. Private tours will be offered for a nominal fee and will act as an educational tool for visitors to Gloucester.

Blackfriars will continue to provide essential access to Gloucester's rich history and will encourage more local engagement with partners whilst diversifying its reach with more activities targeted at young people.

The centre courtyard of Blackfriars is a green open space that has been used for outdoor events but is the ideal location to sit and relax on one of the bespoke picnic benches designed by a local carpenter. This space, along with the onsite catering facilities means that there is an opportunity to increase awareness of the site by becoming a place to meet friends.



Consistency in the visitor attraction offer is essential. Having tested the site, changed opening hours on numerous occasions, and seeing how the business has developed, the visitor attraction side of the business is now being prioritised and Blackfriars will now see increased footfall on Sundays throughout the year.

KEY ACTIVITY...

- Undertake a visitor journey mapping exercise to understand the flow of our visitors, in advance, during and after their visit.
- Develop an interpretation plan to enhance the visitor experience and to help educate those visiting Blackfriars.
- Develop a Blackfriars audio tour to bring the history of Blackfriars to life whilst also considering all access needs to attract a wider audience.
- Increase the commercial activity onsite to include upselling of the guidebook, refreshment availability and bookable add-on packages.
- Recruit a group of volunteers to support activity on visitor attraction days.
- Re-introduce a programme of guided tours of Blackfriars with city partners.
- Develop marketing activity around the new offer to engage new audiences.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

In creating the Blackfriars Business Plan, consideration has been given to the wider national, regional, and local context. Below are the summaries of key strategic documents that inform direction of travel and priorities contained within this plan:

Historic England Future Strategy 2021

- Work collaboratively with people and partners to secure vibrant and sustainable futures for historic places.
- Bring communities together by discovering and celebrating local heritage, and by protecting the character of historic places.
- Inspire and equip people to take action in support of the places they care about.

Gloucester Heritage Strategy 2019-2029

- To achieve effective and sustainable conservation, regeneration, and management of Gloucester's heritage, to realise fully its economic, community and cultural potential.
- A coordinated approach will be taken in areas subject to significant development and regeneration, such as Blackfriars and Greyfriars.
- Creation of business development plans to guide the future development of key venues including Blackfriars Priory.

Gloucester Cultural Strategy 2021-2026

- Embed culture in the city's future plans.
- Build the cultural and creative industries by developing artists and arts organisations.
- Broaden the Cultural offer to support social and economic development.
- Develop a vibrant city centre, full of cultural activity and things to do.
- Develop audiences for all the cultural opportunities being created.
- Put Gloucester on the cultural map by developing high profile events.
- Make things happen and continue a momentum for change.

Gloucester City Centre – Our 5 Year Vision – 2023-2028

- The City Council will commission city centre user research in 2024 to obtain local views of the city.
- A space for people to be innovative and creative, with an environment that fosters and nurtures talent and enterprise.
- The city centre is inclusive and has people at its heart.

SWOT & PESTLE

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Iconic building with historic importance. - Offer a blank canvas, enabling creativity and flexibility. - An attractive, enclosed cloister garden. - Established catering partners whose values align. - Unique offer in a city centre location. - High-end / luxurious wedding venue. - Committed and passionate staff with a strong sense of mission. - Stand-alone business without relying on other venues for support. - Strong and regionally/nationally recognised brand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No accommodation available onsite. - Spaces are cold in the autumn and winter. - Lack of onsite storage, often causing logistical issues. - No onsite interpretation. - No onsite kitchen facilities. - No office/welfare space for staff. - Small amount of designated parking. - Limited education offer.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - With investment, improved heating will allow a year-round programme. - Utilising all spaces will allow for growth and increased income. - Improve accessibility with inclusive interpretation. - No volunteer pool to support activity. - Creative partnerships and new activities to attract new audiences and develop our brand identity. - An educational offer for all ages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inflation and increase in energy costs. - Venues with in-house catering. - English Heritage has many venues to maintain – how will Blackfriars compete with flagship properties? - Ongoing maintenance needs of the historic property. - Other venues located in more luxurious surroundings. - Risk around the lease being withdrawn.

Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ National elections, all out elections 2024 – may filter through to local government funding. ➤ Culture is not a statutory service
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Opening of University of Gloucestershire Gloucester campus in September 2024 ➤ Completion of the Forum (Digital Forge) including a 4-star hotel in summer 2024. ➤ Cost of living crisis – with no short-term end in sight. ➤ Gloucester is an Arts Council England priority place from 2021-2024.
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 2021 census data details an increase in population size by 9% since 2011 – higher than the overall increase in England (6.6%). ➤ Gloucester is the most deprived district in the county, ranked 138 of 317 in England. ➤ Population change - 2011-21: +22.3% (age 65+) & +6.8% (age 15-64)
Tech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Customer journey expectations are much higher due to evolving technological advancements.
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Blackfriars is run by Gloucester City Council. ➤ A lease arrangement is in place with English Heritage.
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recognise the climate emergency – aim for net zero 2030 ➤ Electrical vehicle usage and the pressure to decarbonise. ➤ Ethical purchasing and values are more prominent.

BUSINESS STRUCTURE

Blackfriars is owned by English Heritage. Gloucester City Council leased the building in 2012 on a 10-year term. Gloucester City Council sees Blackfriars as an important cultural asset and is looking to renew the lease but for a longer period of 25 years to maximise its potential.

Blackfriars being a building with such historical importance needs a solid business structure that can support the programming and delivery of a world-class venue. The passion and excitement we hold internally needs to be shared with anyone and everyone we meet. We are committed to only hiring the very best people who will hold the vision, mission and values close to their heart.

Blackfriars sits within the Cultural Services team and sits alongside Gloucester Guildhall and the Museum of Gloucester. Staff can work across the different venues but only providing basic support due to the knowledge needed to operate each venue.

Current Structure

The current staffing structure for Blackfriars is small with just one Events & Marketing Officer and one Team Leader being the only full-time staff. A total capacity of 5.4FTE delivers the year-round programme of activity. The team are supported by the Visitor Experience Manager and Cultural Development Manager who reports through to the Head of Culture.

CORE STAFF	SUPPORT STAFF
Events & Marketing Officer – 1xFTE	Senior Operations Officer
Team Leader – 1xFTE	Technical Coordinator
Wedding Coordinator – 1x0.8FTE	Business Administration Officer
Duty Manager – 1x0.6FTE	Casual/Agency Bar Staff
Visitor Experience Assistant – 2x0.6FTE	Engagement Officer
Events Apprentice – 1xFTE	

Resource Needs

All staff work to flexible contracts where they work to the needs of the business. With the forecasted growth and to deliver the ambitions of this plan, additional resource is required.

Resource will be needed in the following areas:

- Wedding Coordination – increasing to a full-time position
- Duty Manager – increase to manage weddings and events
- Visitor Experience Assistant – to support the delivery of the programme
- Administration Support – to support with the high volume of enquiries and bookings
- Engagement Officer – a part time role to support our learning objectives

Resource requirements will be continually monitored, and a business case will demonstrate the need for additional resource as the business grows. Gloucester City Council has demonstrated its commitment to Blackfriars with the creation of a dedicated team in 2020, the introduction of an apprentice and increasing the resource to support weddings.

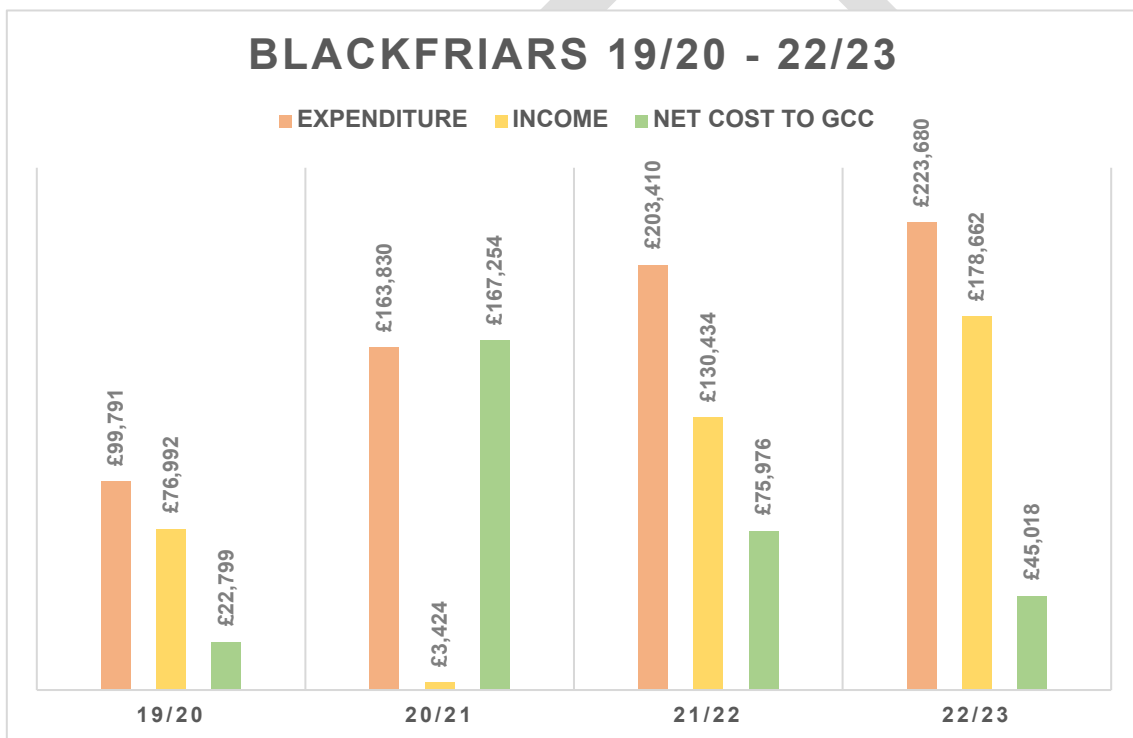
To run Blackfriars effectively, we need the right talent to support us in the next 5 years... and beyond.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

Gloucester City Council funds the delivery of Blackfriars. Our aims and objectives will be achieved by utilising available resources as efficiently as possible. This will enable us to provide services for customers and stakeholders that demonstrates good value for money.

We are committed to reducing costs to the authority, with the longer-term aim of creating a cost-neutral venue, with aspirations of turning a profit in the future. Local authority funding remains vital to us over the next 5 years, but we will enhance that funding through commercial activities and identifying grant funding to support activity. Increasing our financial resources will enable us to do more, deliver better value for money and have a greater impact.

Below, looks back at the financial performance of Blackfriars over the past 4 financial periods:



Please note, at the time of writing this document, the 22/23 figures are a forecast.

An internal restructure in 2020 saw the creation of the Blackfriars team – a dedicated team who would manage the venue and deliver the activity, something it had lacked for years. The increase in expenditure in 20/21 was not an increase in costs on the authority, simply allocating the right resource into the right areas across the culture portfolio, a true reflection of the Blackfriars operating costs. Income in 20/21 was low due to the implications of the worldwide pandemic.

Please note that all historical and projected figures do not account for the support provided by Gloucester City Council, including HR, finance, recruitment, legal and IT.

BUILDING INVESTMENT

We recognise the need to invest in our facilities to ensure that our visitors experience a safe, memorable, accessible, high-quality experience.

Working in partnership with English Heritage, our internal Asset Management service and other funding bodies, Gloucester City Council is committed to investing in Blackfriars. The condition of the historical buildings needs to remain fit for purpose and operate in line with the service needs.

By allowing the venue to strive to its absolute best, having the right facilities, in the right place, designed with the customer in mind whilst utilising the historical assets of the site but being aware of its sensitivity, will lead to increased participation.

As we do not own the building from which we deliver our services, it is critical to our success that the building we operate from has high quality facilities which are attractive to our customers. The authority will continue to investigate how we can bring in funding to enhance the quality of services across the venue.

Any investment will be subject to a rigorous business planning process to support the aims and objectives and that it is sustainable into the future. It will be governed appropriately and will follow these key principles:

- Will demonstrate a robust return on investment and cost-effective operating solutions.
- Enhancing the visitor experience
- Being inclusive
- Reduction of the organisations carbon footprint

There will continue to be a reliance on English Heritage to maintain elements of the site as per the lease agreement and to work in partnership with the Blackfriars team to seek funding to maximise the assets of the site. Investment is needed to continually improve; it's about constantly doing better.

With ambitions of activity taking place year-round, investment is needed to ensure that the spaces are warm and comfortable for visitors. The East Range has good heating to allow for year-round bookings. The North Range can become extremely cold during Autumn and Winter and customers are warned of this prior to booking, leading to a lower conversion rate. Portable space heaters have been purchased to warm up the spaces but can be costly to run and negatively impacts the authorities plans to achieve net-zero by 2030. Investing in a permanent heating solution will allow the building to successfully operate year-round, leading to increased income. Fundraising or an application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund or other funding bodies will be needed to support the installation of a heating system.

Over the duration of this 5-year plan as well as the 25-year lease, Gloucester City Council will lease all existing areas in the lease dated the 30th March 2012 but in addition, will include the Scriptorium along with the rear courtyard adjoining the Scriptorium and the rear access point which will be solely used by the Blackfriars team to maximise the use of the Scriptorium.

In future years and subject to business growth, the authority would like first refusal on all potential areas for expansion. Blackfriars lacks onsite accommodation for its couples and has a partnership with a local accommodation provider. Onsite accommodation would result in increased bookings as a lack of onsite accommodation has resulted in losing bookings. Being alerted to new opportunities at the earliest possible time would allow Gloucester City Council to explore the feasibility of spaces and take forward as necessary.

The site does not have a comfortable working space for staff working on-site. Delivery within a culture and events space can be challenging, it's a physically demanding industry to work in and our staff welfare is important. Opportunities for expansion to provide a space for the team to breathe and take time out is critical.

Blackfriars has limited storage onsite and therefore requires constant movement of equipment and furniture around the hireable spaces. Utilising existing spaces and new spaces will allow increased efficiencies and will allow the venue to invest in further equipment to deliver the activity.

TALENT INVESTMENT

Blackfriars has an excellent team of staff who have continued to deliver to a high level. To deliver the ambition and vision set out in this business plan, we need to invest in our people. Systems and processes will be continually reviewed and refreshed, and staffing resources assessed to make sure that Blackfriars is as strong as possible for the future. Boosting our staff's confidence, skills, experience, and networks will deliver benefits for individuals, our team, and the whole organisation.

FUNDRAISING

Blackfriars has not approached any external funders for support to develop Blackfriars. There are several national funders who offer capital funds and project grants to support the development of cultural activity. Investing and committing to educational and engagement activity will open the gates to cultural funding.

As part of this 5-year plan, we will start to use our established contacts through other projects across the culture portfolio to start to build the case for support for Blackfriars. Partnering with the English Heritage team to attract funding is vital.

FINANCIAL PROJECTION

Below provides a financial forecast based on the aims and objectives of this 5-year plan.

EXPENDITURE	FORECAST					
	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28	28/29
Employees	215,888	262,441	278,645	287,071	295,949	304,889
Premises	38,650	44,575	45,704	47,006	48,180	49,377
Third Party Payments*	5,000	5,250	5,381	5,516	5,654	5,795
Supplies & Services	47,000	48,200	53,400	61,600	69,800	80,000
TOTAL	306,538	360,466	383,130	401,192	419,583	440,060

INCOME	FORECAST					
	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28	28/29
Commercial Activity	(165,000)	(181,500)	(203,000)	(231,500)	(264,000)	(298,500)
Cultural Activity	(500)	(1,100)	(1,800)	(2,500)	(3,500)	(4,500)
Bar Sales	(75,000)	(90,000)	(108,000)	(130,000)	(155,000)	(185,000)
Grants	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	(240,500)	(272,600)	(312,800)	(364,000)	(422,500)	(488,000)

PROFIT/LOSS	66,038	87,866	70,330	37,192	(2,917)	(47,940)
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*Subject to negotiation with English Heritage

FINANCIAL PROJECTION NARRATIVE

Historical financial information does not show the true growth of Blackfriars. It shows resource coming from the wider culture portfolio, a service that was affected by the pandemic and a business that was still finding its feet.

Blackfriars has become the commercial arm of the wider cultural offer that Gloucester City Council is committed to support. Inflation has driven an increase across all operational costs which puts additional pressure on income generation.

Projected employee costs increase significantly in 24/25 due to additional resource needs, in conjunction with increased salary costs. Additional staffing needs will be monitored closely and only utilised if there is demand. Proposed additional staffing needs are extracted below to demonstrate the additional cost that affects the bottom line.

2023/24

Wedding Coordinator	Increase from 0.81 to 1FTE	£6,863 pa
Events Administration Support	New 0.4FTE	£12,622 pa
Bar Staff	New 0.6FTE (casual / agency)	£12,600 pa

2024/25

Duty Manager	New 0.6FTE	£21,207 pa
Visitor Experience Assistant	New 0.6FTE	£18,764 pa

2025/26

Engagement Officer	New 0.2FTE	£8,160 pa
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It's hard to forecast at this stage when the additional resource is required so these figures reflect the potential resource needs over the next 5 years subject to activity onsite and are included in the financial forecast for the next 5 years. If the budgeted resource isn't required, then Blackfriars is likely to turn a profit by 26/27.

Our team are attuned to financial imperatives as part of their work, but we can do better. Robust charging models for weddings will be developed, maximising financial return whilst remaining competitive. Every visitor has the chance to contribute to a more sustainable Blackfriars. Our bookable products, food and beverage and new initiatives must exceed our visitors' expectations. We need to do more to understand what our visitors enjoy, what new initiatives they might respond to and how they will support us. Better plans for retail, licensing and catering sit alongside our projected visitor increases.

In an environment that is financially constrained, we recognise that we need to think big, take bold moves and provide greater value for money. It will necessitate strong cost control to stand more firmly on our own two feet.

By the end of this 5-year plan, Blackfriars will turn a profit.

RISK ASSESSMENT

We recognise the importance of managing strategic risk across the organisation and there are systems in place to manage these risks. Risk management is an ongoing process which will be rigorously reviewed at appropriate levels throughout the organisations. All risks are tracked and monitored in the Blackfriars Risk Register. The key risks identified and summarised include:

Financial Risk

Blackfriars is currently funded by Gloucester City Council. Although Blackfriars has continued to demonstrate a successful operating model, it does remain a cost to the authority. With government funding reducing, there is risk of funding to Blackfriars also reducing. The impact of the economic downturn will see a decrease in disposable income and could see a decline in our chargeable services. To safeguard, we will:

- Continue to push Blackfriars to reduce the financial burden annually to the authority.
- Review fees and charges annually to ensure value for money whilst also considering the increase in operating costs e.g., energy and cost of living costs.

Competition Risk

Gloucester is a historical city and does have a notable number of historical venues who provides a similar offer to that of Blackfriars. Within Gloucestershire, there are a large amount of wedding venues in secluded countryside locations whereas Blackfriars is in Gloucester City Centre surrounded by busy roads. To safeguard, we will:

- Continue to provide the benefits of a city centre location, using the 'hidden gem'.
- Keep abreast of trends in the industry to ensure that the venue meets the needs of its customers and visitors.

Reputational Risk

The Blackfriars team is very small when you compare the programme of activity that is delivered. If Blackfriars continues to grow at the pace it has since the pandemic, then additional resource will be needed. Due to the team being so small, there is a risk around losing key staff who hold significant knowledge: To safeguard, we will:

- Closely monitor the number of enquiries and bookings and use a forecasting tool to assess the future resource needs of the venue.
- Use business cases to demonstrate the need for additional resource.
- Identify individual team members career aspirations and support development to ensure retention.

Property Risk

By its nature, Blackfriars is an old building and will naturally face building maintenance issues. The occurrence of building defects will need to be addressed immediately as any delay will have an effect on reputation and income. The business needs to comply with statutory health and safety obligations which is not obeyed can result in financial penalties. To safeguard, we will:

- Ensure there remains to be clear lines of responsibility between the authority and English Heritage and that the quarterly meetings between partners identify any property issues along with timescales for completion.
- Ensure that the authorities Asset Management service in conjunction with the building management system conducts the necessary compliance actions.

MONITORING & EVALUATION

Our business plan is a vital part of the 'golden thread' that links both Gloucester City Council and English Heritage to Blackfriars.

The business plan is owned by the cultural management team with the Events and Marketing Officer and Senior Operations Officer taking responsibility to ensure that the business plan aims, and objectives are met when making decisions.

To ensure all key outcomes and priorities are achieved, the business performance will be monitored and reviewed in the following ways:

- Quarterly performance updates will be provided to the management team. These updates will highlight performance against targets alongside an overview of the income and expenditure associated with each business area.
- Quarterly financial meetings will take place with the authority's accountant.
- The business plan will be reviewed annually to determine its effectiveness and to update and agree the delivery plan for the following year.
- The Blackfriars site team will use this plan to form individual priority and performance plans which will be reviewed monthly.
- Feedback through the annual staff survey.
- Online reviews through tourism, event, and wedding industry related platforms.

Included in the measures of success would see several social and economic benefits:

- Increased participation.
- Increase in the number of volunteers and volunteering hours.
- Increased spend in Gloucester and the local area.

We will use this data intelligently and dynamically for advocacy, resource deployment and to give visitors the best possible experience.

FINAL WORD

Blackfriars, one of the most complete surviving friaries of Dominican 'black friars' in England ... a space that residents of Gloucester should be proud of, visitors are in awe of, and a team that embrace the historical surrounds and are inspired to promote. We will inspire such passion in others by opening the gates to Blackfriars.

The 13th Century priory, stunning backdrops, scissor-braced roof, the oldest surviving library... mixed with an eclectic and quirky programme, the increased desire to tie the knot somewhere with character whilst being part of history allows Blackfriars to become a leader in its sector and will continue to push boundaries over the next 5 years.

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APPENDICES

1 – Management arrangement. Confidential.

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