

Gloucester City Council

Meeting:	Cabinet Briefing	Date:	14 Feb 24
	Cabinet		6 Mar 24
Subject:	Blackfriars Priory 2023 Progress Report & Plans for 2024-25		
Report Of:	Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure		
Wards Affected:	All		
Key Decision:	No	Budget/ Policy Framework:	No
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Appendices:	A. Review of Blackfriars Priory activity 2023		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1.0 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide an update on activity taken place at Blackfriars in 2023 and to give a brief overview of proposed activity due to take place in the 2024-2025 financial period.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 Cabinet is asked to **RESOLVE** that

- (1) The report is accepted, and progress is noted.
- (2) To support the planned activity for 2024-2025.

3.0 Background and Key Issues

- 3.1 The Blackfriars Business Plan 2023 – 2028 was welcomed and adopted by Cabinet on 14 June 2023. Blackfriars is reaching the end of Year 1 of the plan.

3.2 Overview of 2023

2023 was the busiest year of events that Blackfriars Priory has delivered since Gloucester City Council took on the lease in 2012. We had a successful wedding season with 35 weddings taking place, with recognition of our offer at regional awards. We developed our programme of cultural events to include theatre performances, a lively Q&A with King Henry VIII, storytelling, alongside festival and event hires like the popular Gloucester History Festival.

3.3 Performance against Business Plan 2023/24

The annual income target for 2023/24 was £149,000 with an internal stretch target of £183,000. The forecast to year end is showing income of £294,000. The success of this year can be attributed to several factors, including a boost to wedding bookings for 2023 that were made as the pandemic eased in 2021 and 2022. Buyer behaviour has also shifted, with an increasing trend in short notice bookings.

There has been an increase in clients spending more to make their events special, particularly for corporate bookings, with high spend bar tabs, welcome drinks, and elevated catering options for attendees, with over £100,000 of the forecast being attributed to catering commission and bar income.

3.4 Growth of Business

Blackfriars continues to seek opportunities for growth:

- Creating packages for small wedding ceremonies with 12 or fewer guests, which have become popular post-pandemic, with couples choosing to combine this with a party at home, instead of a full wedding ceremony and reception in venue.
- Completed catering tender in 2023 ensured that a wide selection of suppliers were appointed that could cover a diverse range of menus, to increase choice for a range of budgets.
- Developing the bar offer, with the team researching cocktail suppliers, elevated glassware, and wine options.
- Adopting a commission basis and buying our own equipment for events in the Scriptorium, such as the cocktail bar events, to ensure the event is profitable.

3.5 Team Development

The team has expanded to include a full-time wedding and events coordinator, which has improved the experience for couples with a dedicated resource to these relationships.

Training opportunities to improve staff skills and knowledge are of paramount importance. All team members have completed a visual impairment training course with Gloucestershire Sight Loss Council to enable staff to confidently assist visitors with visual impairments and understand how to make the site more accessible. Furthermore, a member of the team is part of the EDI focus group at GCC and topics and fed back to the team and implemented, such as the installation of high contrast toilet seats and inclusive signage.

The Blackfriars Priory programme of events is much busier than in pre-pandemic years. Additional staff resource in the cultural development and visitor experience teams will allow wider reach marketing, a more varied programme and smoother delivery.

3.7 Blackfriars Priory Activity 2024-25

We recognise the potential to grow on the success of the business to date in 2024/25, through a variety of commercial and cultural activity, including but not limited to:

- Increasing the schedule of Candlelight concerts throughout the year
- Creating packages to entice business, such as wedding party and corporate Christmas packages
- Scriptorium Cocktail bar
- Weddings
- History Festival
- Parties
- Meetings & corporate events
- Theatre
- Exploring new partnerships, for example with Storm Jar studio to create an immersive experience rooted in the history of the site.
- Expanding the use of the Scriptorium (pending completion of structural works and lease renewal)
- Specialist fairs and markets

4.0 Social Value Considerations

4.1 Applicants for the catering tender needed to demonstrate how their company delivered on Social Value considerations. The companies chosen offer employment opportunities for local people as well as training opportunities.

4.2 When programming open days, Blackfriars Priory does its utmost to ensure that more local people, entertainers, contractors, services can be involved.

5.0 Environmental Implications

5.1 The environmental impact of Blackfriars Priory will become a key consideration of decision-making of how events are delivered at the venue. There is an aspiration for the city to be net carbon neutral and the events that place will need to work towards this common goal. The team are active within the Cultural Services sustainability working group and the topic is regularly occurring item on the weekly operational meeting agenda.

5.2 In order to hold other third-party suppliers accountable to these environmental sustainability targets, companies will be expected to demonstrate clear policies and procedures and commitment towards sustainability.

5.3 Internally steps are being taken to reduce the impact of events on the environment, with improved recycling procedures, appointing caterers who demonstrated strong commitments around sustainability in their tender application, encouraging clients to choose environmentally friendly options for their events through blogging and in our sustainability policy on the website. Site litter clearance and recycling and the use of low-carbon materials will be encouraged in all third-party events.

5.4 By the end of 23/24, several staff will be accredited as being Carbon Literate following training delivered by the Carbon Literacy Project.

6.0 Alternative Options Considered

6.1 None

7.0 Reasons for Recommendations

7.1 This approach builds on the strengths of the Blackfriars Priory programme, whilst introducing opportunities to raise the venue's profile in line with the ambitions of the Cultural Strategy.

8.0 Future Work and Conclusions

8.1 In 2024, Gloucester City Council is entering into a new lease with English Heritage for the next 20 years. Discussions have taken place around the use of the Scriptorium building to expand usage of the site and benefit visitors with accessing rare history. Long awaited works have been completed on a cob wall, with remaining works to the first floor due to take place in 2024. This will open potential to use the first floor and widen the event programme. The renewal of the lease is an exciting opportunity for GCC, as Blackfriars is setting itself as a landmark venue in Gloucestershire.

8.2 Securing the Scriptorium is a priority as this space not only has historical importance, but it is also a fantastic space to programme. This will be resolved as part of lease negotiations.

8.3 New partnerships for cultural programming are being explored for 2024/25, utilising Blackfriars for site-specific and immersive events.

8.4 We will review the programme of events on an annual basis.

9.0 Financial Implications

9.1 None received.

(Finance have been consulted in the preparation of this report.)

10.0 Legal Implications

10.1 Under s120 of the Local Government Act 1972, the Council may acquire land for any of its functions under the Local Government Act 1972 or for the benefit, improvement or development of its area, including by way of lease.

10.2 If the Council takes a new lease of the property for a period of 20 years, this means that the Council is committing to run and manage the site for that period. The Council may wish to consider the inclusion of one or more break clauses in the lease to enable it to terminate the lease early in the event that the business does not proceed as expected.

- 10.3 If the Council will be paying rent under the lease then it will be tied into doing so for a period of 20 years and therefore it should ensure that there are appropriate budgetary provisions in place for that period.

(One Legal have been consulted in the preparation of this report.)

11.0 Risk & Opportunity Management Implications

- 11.1 Gloucester City Council are working with English Heritage to renew the lease. The previous 10-year lease has now ended, and the City Council are entering a longer lease period of 20 years. This will no doubt bring the City Council increased opportunities in utilising the spaces to maximise revenue. A longer lease will also attract funding from external sources.
- 11.2 Historical buildings, always come with the challenge of ongoing maintenance and development. Being a Grade 1 listed building, with areas not currently accessible to the public, there will no doubt be a continual need to work closely with English Heritage to ensure that any planned works are well managed with minimal disruption to the programme.
- 11.3 Blackfriars has recovered well since the pandemic. 23/24 was a bumper year for weddings due to the number of couples booking ahead once out of the pandemic. 24/25 onwards will require an increase in marketing to maintain the level of income it has seen in 23/24. There is risk that the service will generate less revenue in 24/25 due to several wedding cancellations, with couples citing the cost-of-living crisis, but early planning and budget monitoring will allow the service to address any reduction as early as possible.

12.0 People Impact Assessment (PIA) and Safeguarding:

- 12.1 N/A – progress report only

13.0 Community Safety Implications

- 13.1 None

14.0 Staffing & Trade Union Implications

- 14.1 None

15.0 Background Documents:

[Gloucester's Cultural Vision and Strategy 2021-2026](#)
[gloucester-cultural-vision-and-strategy-gct-gcc-min.pdf](#)