



Shropshire Hills Discovery  
Centre Advisory Board

21 November 2011

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Item / Paper

**3**

Public

## **SHROPSHIRE HILLS DISCOVERY CENTRE, APRIL TO OCTOBER 2011**

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### **1. Round up of our services at the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre**

#### **1.1 Craven Arms Library**

Our two Thursday Rhyme time sessions, for under fives and their carers, were well attended until the summer holidays. However, the start of the new school year has seen numbers fall and so we are now offering a single session a week. Attendance will be monitored over the year to see if demand requires the re-introduction of the second session.

The library continues to support seven local Reading Groups, including the Craven Arms group who meet once a month at the Centre.

General use of the library has fallen a little this year. Total loans to the end of October were 17,402, down 6% on the same period last year. This is mainly attributable to significantly lower use in May and June, (this was a trend across the library service possibly because of the weather and the bank holidays), which is now being offset by smaller increases over the autumn months.

#### **1.2 Secret Hills exhibition, Café and Retail**

Our events and activities programme has been successful this year in generating increased paid visits by adults and children. Education has also performed well, with children participating in paid educational activities seeing an increase of 21% year on year. However, overall revenue is down. The price reduction of admissions tickets has not driven sufficiently more visits to offset the cost and secondary spend in the shop (down 3%) and café (down 4%) is lower than last year. This reflects the effects that the challenging financial climate is having on consumer spending.

Fees and charges for 2012-13 are currently being reviewed as part of a central exercise and there will be a full internal review of catering prices, to be completed in January.

Customer satisfaction with the exhibition, café and retail remain high, with around 90% of respondents rating them at 4 or 5 out of 5. Indeed average ratings for all these areas have increased slightly year on year.

### **1.3 Education and Events**

#### **Family Workshops**

Family workshops have been well attended across this period, the highlight being a Gruffalo workshop that linked with the Marches Feast of Words in March when we had three sessions fully booked on one day.

Over the summer we offered two sessions daily at 1pm and 3pm. Although there were bookings for both sessions on most days, the combined numbers did not often exceed 12 (the maximum number of places per session). This resulted in small groups where dynamics were lacking. For next year, we have therefore taken the decision to advertise the only the 1pm sessions, but offer an additional session at 3pm in the event of the first being fully booked.

The age of those attending the workshops has been consistently in the lower half of the advertised range (usually 3 or 5 to 11 years old) so our 2012 activities will be tailored towards this next year.

#### **School Visits**

Due to the late Easter holidays, succeeded rapidly by two Bank Holidays, school visits during the first half of the summer term started slowly. This was compensated for by an extremely busy second half of term which soon became fully booked. The majority of bookings came from Key Stage One but we also had some interest from secondary schools in sustainability issues

We have also enjoyed a busy autumn term with numbers being augmented by block bookings from two schools, one of which was a secondary. Once again, the season has been extended, this time well into November.

#### **Extended Schools**

Stephanie Bellows, Education Assistant, has enjoyed continued success with the after school Discovery Club. Six local schools took advantage of this opportunity during the spring term and three schools have booked sessions for this half of the autumn term.

We have also taken some bookings for outreach sessions.

#### **Toddle Time**

Due to Jacqui Jones' perseverance and cheerfulness, we are at last welcoming consistently high numbers to this weekly session. This offers under 5s and their carers outdoor activities and crafts.

#### **Adult Courses**

This is the first full year we have offered a programme of courses in the areas of arts and the natural environment for adults. Half of the courses ran but unfortunately half had to be cancelled due to lack of interest. This can be attributed possibly to the present financial situation where people have less disposable income to spend on hobbies in addition to this being a new element at the centre which is still establishing its reputation locally. Much time was spent this year by Education Officer, Laura Harvey, on advertising this programme at a local level.

## **1.4 Onny Meadows and Outdoors**

### **Forest school**

The monthly Dads' and Kids' Forest School stopped in the spring due to low attendance.

The Forest School space continues to be used by school groups.

### **Community involvement in meadows maintenance and development**

Wednesday volunteer sessions have continued to contribute to the maintenance of the meadows this year.

This winter we are repeating two adult learning courses which were offered very successfully last year - Hedge laying and Grow Your Own Fuel Coppicing. Both were affordably priced, well attended and allowed much work to be completed in the meadows at no additional cost to ourselves.

### **ArtWalk and Sculpture Trail**

The 2011 ArtWalk focused on the sculpture trail within the Onny Meadows and was well attended. Unfortunately, due to a staffing vacancy at the Community Centre they were not involved in 2011. We will be working with CravenArts Community Interest Company this winter to see what they feel is achievable for 2012 given more limited access to funding. It is likely that the Centre will have to offer more support if the ArtWalk is to happen again in 2012.

## **1.5 Other services**

### **Shropshire Council Customer Service Point (SCSP)**

The customer service point continues to operate within the Centre. Availability has varied over the year given staffing limitations.

### **Registrar**

There is an appointment only session run on Mondays by the Shropshire Registration Service.

### **Craven Arms Homework Club**

A budget reduction in April this year has already resulted in Homework Club sessions being reduced from three to two sessions per week, term time only (previously year round).

It is now likely that Extended Services, which currently funds the Homework Club, will cease at the end of March 2012. With this in mind the Library Service is currently negotiating with Shropshire Council to agree further base funding, which could then be used as match funding for top up funding applications. If this rescue plan is not successful Craven Arms Homework Club will close at the end of March 2012.

The Homework Club has proven educational and community benefits, through its positive diversionary activities. We would be very upset to lose this provision for young people in Craven Arms, as it provides a much needed resource and safe place for them within the community. Migrant families have benefited greatly from one to one or small group support, and the club has also supported children with

additional needs, looked after children and families where parents are struggling to help their children with schoolwork.

## **2. Marketing, Promotion and Events**

### **2.1 Marketing & Promotion**

The way marketing is delivered across the Visitor Economy team is being currently being evaluated. This exercise is being led by Tim King, Shropshire Council Tourism Officer.

There are significant challenges to be faced due to savings that need to be made. Furthermore, the Communications team have been tasked with authorising all marketing activity. This process of challenge can be time-consuming and frustrating.

We would welcome discussion regarding the Centre's marketing and promotional activity for 2012-13 at the meeting.

### **2.2 Events and Activities 2012**

The 2012 programme is being finalised, so the following list is subject to change. Provisional family activities for school holidays are:

- February half term – Really Remarkable Romans
- Easter – Disasters and Dinosaurs
- May half term – Pond Dipping
- Summer – Purple prickles and poisonous warts; Smoke and Fire; Hogweed's school of magic
- September – ArtWalk
- October half term – Dragon Detectives

## **3. Community Projects and activities**

### **3.1 Craven Arms Local History Group**

Every Friday morning the volunteers are available to help people with enquiries and continue their work cataloguing documents relating to the local area.

The talk / workshop program on the first Wednesday evening of the month continues. The History Group are also hosting a drop in open weekend in January.

### **3.2 Craven Arms Volunteers for the Environment (CAVE)**

CAVE continues to be an invaluable help to the Centre keeping a programme of management activities going in the Meadows.

### **3.3 Craven Arms Community Food & Grow, Cook, Share**

The Farmers' markets continue to be well attended and have a core group of stallholders who come every month.

The Grow, Cook, Share project is continuing to deliver its outputs. They have been instrumental in the progress that the Community Garden has made over the year. We will be continuing to work them as part of the steering group in the coming year.

### **3.4 Play**

Via Project Onion, money has now been secured for improved play provision in Craven Arms. This will be in the shape of a BMX track and other improvements on the playing fields.

### **3.5 Other partnership and community events and activities**

The Centre continues to be used by the Guides and Brownies.

Following the reduction in evening opening, the RSPB local group's talks programme has moved to an alternative venue.

## **4. Operation of the Centre**

### **4.1 Christmas Closure 2011**

Over Christmas it has been the Centre's usual practice to close on the 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> December and 1<sup>st</sup> January. Last year Council agreed to close all non-essential sites and services over the entire period. We were granted permission to operate as previously and so were open on 27<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> December and on the bank holiday Monday on 3<sup>rd</sup> January.

This year we are considering closing in line with other sites. This would mean being closed from Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> December to Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> January inclusive.

Over the same period last year we had 1,474 users (0.8% annual total) and 76 paying visitors (0.38% annual total). If we were to close for these additional five days lost net income would be around £2,000. This would be offset by savings realised by granting leave to customer facing staff which did not need to be covered by other staff as we would be closed, (this would be in the region of £1,300).

We have been asking customers' opinion on this and the suggestion to close has been supported by over 90% of respondents. We would value your opinion on this matter.

### **4.2 Business plan and budget**

It has been agreed by Council that the Discovery Centre needs to find savings of £40,000 in 2012-13 and £45,000 in 2013-14.

We are currently working to identify how these savings could be achieved and initial areas for consideration include:

- Continue to operate the reduced evening opening hours
- Reduce staffing levels on the Front desk and Café, (due to the recruitment freeze and natural staff turnover this could be implemented without affecting existing contractual commitments)
- A reduction in operating hours
- Reduction in marketing spend

- Assessment of staffing structure
- Review of fees and charges (NB centrally agreed increases would negate how much this could offset savings)
- Cleaning and sanitary waste contracts

These challenging savings will put pressure on the operation of the Centre. The officers would welcome discussion of possible strategies to realise these savings with the Advisory Board.

## **5. Conclusion**

Given the tough economic climate this year some decrease in revenue is to be expected.

It is testament to the work of the Education team that opportunity for growth was identified and delivered in this area.

Customer satisfaction is high and improving across the Centre's activities. The Centre continues to work hard to the benefit of both members of the local community and the area as a whole through its place in the tourism sector.

The key challenge of the next few years will be striking the right balance between the community and commercial aspects of the Centre's operations.

**List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)**

**Human Rights Act Appraisal**

No issues

**Environmental Appraisal**

Future work will encompass the principles of sustainable development particularly with respect to building and exhibition material and the running of the Centre and Onny Meadows.

**Risk Management Appraisal**

The management of the Discovery Centre is informed by a business plan and marketing plan.

**Community / Consultations Appraisal**

User and off site surveys are ongoing. Any new proposals will be informed by further consultation.

**Cabinet Member**

Cllr Mike Owen

**Local Member**

Cllr David Evans

**Appendices**

**Decision(s)**