

Report of	Meeting	Date
Deputy Chief Executive (Introduced by Executive Member for Resources)	Council	Tuesday, 22 February 2022

Re-opening of Astley Hall

Is this report confidential?	No
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Is this decision key?	Not applicable
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Purpose of the Report

1. To agree the proposals for re-opening Astley Hall following the extensive renovations. This includes introducing an admission fee to support the long-term sustainability of one of our most historic and landmark attractions in the borough.

Recommendations to Council

2. To introduce an admission fee for entry into Astley Hall as set out in this report.
3. To agree a concessionary rate for residents.
4. To note the increased opening hours of the Hall to provide more opportunities for people to visit.
5. To approve the other related fees and charges, including weddings, as set out in Appendix A.

Reasons for recommendations

6. The introduction of an admission fee is a change to the fees and charges so the decision is necessary to allow implementation.

Other options considered and rejected

7. We have considered both not introducing an admission fee and various options for how we charge residents of the borough.
8. The option of not introducing an admission fee has been rejected because the significant investment made in the Hall means this is an opportunity to look at how we can secure the longer term sustainability of the building, which is one of the council's most important assets.

9. The income generated from the admission fees will offset some of the costs of operating the Hall, which will include further maintenance work that will be required in the future.
10. We are conscious that the Hall was gifted to the people of Chorley so we have looked at various options for what we would charge residents. The proposal within this paper is to charge a reduced rate (compared to what non-residents would pay) that would give residents access for a full year.
11. We feel that it is important that if we do introduce an admission fee it is payable by all visitors to ensure consistency in valuing the attraction. It will also reduce some of the anti social behaviour issues we have experienced in recent times with young people causing a nuisance in the Hall as they have been able to gain access free of charge.
12. We will look to add further value for residents by introducing offers throughout the year and an incentive to visit the museum shop, which opened in December 2020.

Executive summary

13. Astley Hall has undergone significant renovation works during the pandemic including the creation of a new museum shop, a transformation to the front of the building with new windows and removal of the render that exposed the historic brick frontage. There is also work being done to improve the visitor experience and route within the Hall to provide an improved visitor experience.
14. Given the substantial work totalling £1.1 million it is proposed that the Hall reopens to the public at the end of April with the introduction of an admission fee that helps the attraction to become more sustainable. The proposals also look to provide more access to the Hall with longer opening hours.
15. The proposed admission price is included in the paper with a one-off visitor fee, annual passes and a reduced rate for residents.
16. If approved the changes would be implemented with immediate effect enabling staff to make final preparations ahead of re-opening.
17. The changes will also result in an enhanced offer for weddings and other bookings giving us scope to increase the fees for such events too.

Corporate priorities

18. The report relates to the following corporate priorities:

Involving residents in improving their local area and equality of access for all	A strong local economy
Clean, safe and healthy communities	An ambitious council that does more to meet the needs of residents and the local area

Background to the report

19. Charging admission fees in museums has changed back and forth over the years in line with the level and availability of Arts Council and local government grants. In the current climate many local museums charge an entrance fee while national museums tend to be free due to subsidy. They rely on funding applications, shop, café and temporary exhibition fees.
20. It is proposed that Astley Hall starts to charge admission fees for two major reasons:
 - To become a more commercial and therefore sustainable asset for Chorley Council
 - To better manage the impact of heavy footfall on the property to ensure it remains a sustainable asset into the future

Other properties in the area and their charges

21. We have undertaken four local comparisons to highlight the differences in prices at three historical houses that attract a similar footfall.

Hoghton Tower (Trust)

- Adults £9; Children under 16 £6; Children under 5 Free – options given for additional donations/gift aid.

Rufford Old Hall (National Trust)

- Adults £5; Child £2.50; Family £7.50 (one adult and three children). Gift aid option available

Towneley Hall (Local Government)

- Adults £5.50 for an annual pass; Children and students free. Additional car park charges for all visitors - approximately £5 all day.

Lancaster Castle (Royal Estate)

- Adults £8, concessions (over 65s, disabilities, carers and students) £6.50, Children (under 5s free) £6.50, families (up to four people) £20. School group tour £4 per head. Daytime group tours £6.50 per head. Adult evening tours £8 per head.

Astley Hall proposal

Local residents

22. The fee would be £5 for an annual pass for adults, £2.50 for children and £15 for a family (two adults and up to three children). A one-off visit charge would be £2.50 per adult and £1.50 per child. Under 5s would be free as well as people with disabilities and carers.

Visitors

23. Adults £5; Concessions £3.75; 6-16 £3; Under 5s Free; Family Day Pass (x2 Adults and up to 3 children) £10; Adult yearly pass £15; Family yearly pass £25; Coach Parties 1 free per every ten. People with disabilities and carers are free of charge.
24. Entry via the use of time credits would be available for both residents and visitors.
25. A series of incentives and discounts will be worked up as part of the marketing plan to include participation in national events such as Heritage Open Days which offer free admission to all.

Projections of admission fees and shop profit

26. Although Astley receives approximately 60,000 visitors, many are to the other buildings including the Coach House and Farmhouse. Footfall through the Hall is probably nearer 40,000 but will reduce with the introduction of fees. If we received 15,000 paying visitors to the Hall per year and based it on a mix of adults and children we would receive approximately £52,000.
27. This projection is based on 15,000 visitors and assuming half will be tourists and half will be residents. A further assumption would be the ratio of adults and children is also split roughly 50/50.

Ticket type	Cost	Number sold	Income	Total (after VAT)
Resident (annual)	£5	7,500	£37,500	£31,250
Adult (visitor)	£5	2,000	£10,000	£8,333
Concession (visitor)	£3.75	2,000	£7,500	£6,250
Child (visitor)	£3	3,500	£10,500	£8,750
			Total	£54,583

28. Opening hours for the Hall would also be extended to include some weekdays too. Prior to the pandemic the Hall was only open at weekends (12noon-4pm) with extra days during the summer holidays. Suggested opening times would be:
 - Hall closed January and February for essential maintenance, conservation of artefacts etc. (the Hall is ordinarily closed for these two months)
 - Opens March to December – Mondays and Tuesdays closed; Wednesdays to Thursdays 11am until 4pm; Fridays and Saturdays open 1pm to 5pm (to accommodate morning weddings) Sundays 11am until 4pm.
 - Based on this scenario, the Hall is open 5 days per week all season, not just in the holidays, and still accommodates weddings on Fridays and Saturdays but the casual staffing costs will rise the more hours we are open.
 - The Hall will have to close during set up for Chorley Flower Show and we need to consider how we charge visitors during the event.
29. The shop opened in December 2020 and has been affected by Covid restrictions so we have no current trend to use to project forward. Going forward, taking into account stock replenishment, VAT etc. we anticipate a surplus of £10,000 per year.

Impact on Friends of Astley Hall donations

30. There would be a considerable impact on the Friends donations which go towards the up keep of the house. However, there is opportunity to refocus and engender proactivity amongst the Friends towards volunteering and fundraising. And we could introduce a 'gift' option on the admission fees as a donation towards the Friends.

Impact on weddings

31. With the redecoration and wider improvements to the Hall this gives us an opportunity to revisit the wedding offering and potential for more income. However, it will need to be balanced with the opening hours of the Hall as weddings often fall in line with popular visitor times.
32. Market research suggests we should increase the fees charged for weddings to between £2,500-£3,000. Current charges range from £690 - £1,050 inclusive of VAT. We are proposing to increase these to £1,795 - £2,495. (full detail to follow in Appendix A).

Educational visits

33. We don't propose to make any changes to the cost of educational visits. This would remain at £3-4 per head and be community rather than profit driven.

Projected income for 2022/23

34. Based on the above, the proposal is that we set a target of £35,000 for income/profit in year one. This would consist of:
 - £54,500 in admission fees
 - £10,000 surplus from the shop
 - £5,000 from weddings, educational visits and other chargeable eventsTotal income - £69,500
We anticipate that staffing costs (staff to enable the Hall to be open more days) would increase by circa £32,000.
Total income after additional staffing costs - £37,500.

Proposals for re-opening the Hall

35. The re-opening of Astley Hall will coincide with the 100-year anniversary since the Hall was handed over to the council to look after it for the people of Chorley. Subject to the remaining refurbishment works going to plan we propose to reopen Astley Hall to visitors in April or May with the four-day opening celebration that weekend. It will also see the launch of our renovation exhibition in the Coach House Gallery.
36. It should be noted that the art gallery in Astley Hall will remain closed when the Hall reopens as this is currently storing items of our collection, which are displaced while the cottage roof repairs are undertaken at the rear of the Hall.

Climate change and air quality

37. The work noted in this report does not impact the climate change and sustainability targets of the Councils Green Agenda and all environmental considerations are in place.

Equality and diversity

38. A detailed consultation was undertaken prior to the works to understand what visitors wanted from the Hall.
39. A number of improvements are being made to the visitor route that will improve accessibility in the rooms and a marketing campaign will be undertaken to gain visitors from more diverse communities.
40. The admission fees will include concessions and not apply to people with disabilities or carers allowing free access throughout the year.

Risk

41. The key risk in this proposal is failing to attract sufficient visitors given the introduction of an admission fee.
42. Feedback in the consultation taken prior to the works suggested that visitors would expect to pay a fee to visit this type of attraction and this is backed up by anecdotal evidence from visitors to the Hall.
43. A marketing campaign will be undertaken to ensure sufficient publicity to inform people of the changes and the changes will be reviewed over the course of the first year.

Comments of the Statutory Finance Officer

44. The 22/23 budget currently does not reflect the net income from these proposed charges. Should they be approved the relevant budgets would be amended in the 22/23 financial year.

Comments of the Monitoring Officer

45. Astley Hall and associated buildings and the Park itself is held by the Council for the benefit of the residents of the brother pursuant to a bequest. This does not in itself prevent the proposed charging for access, Members should consider whether the proposed charges are reasonable and or necessary as set out in the body of the report.

Appendices

Appendix A – fees and charges for Astley Hall and Coach House activities

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