

Museum could close for seven months to cut council costs

An Edinburgh museum is facing months of closure as the city's cash-strapped council looks to take "urgent action" to cut costs.

The People's Story Museum on the Royal Mile, which charts the day-to-day experiences of ordinary citizens in the capital from the late 18th century to the present day, has been slated to shut until April next year.

In addition the Queensferry Museum could temporarily have its opening hours cut and become an 'appointment-based' attraction to maintain school visits.

It comes against the backdrop of a projected £26.7m overspend by the council in the current year. However, the proposed scaling-back of museum access is only expected to save £205,000 – less than one per cent of the forecasted budget deficit.

The measures are set out in a report set to be debated by the culture and communities committee next week.

It states: "Given the extent of in-year pressures and limited available corporate mitigations, urgent action requires to be taken to reduce frontline service expenditure if the Council's financial stability is not to be compromised."

The city's museums and galleries service accounts for £467k of the estimated overspend, having spent more on employee costs and generated less income than was expected in 2024-25.

The budget pressures are partly driven by the fact that the Scott Monument on Princes Street – one of the service's biggest moneymakers – has seen a "significant reduction in income" as a result operational changes to visitor access to prevent further suicides.

Furthermore the Nelson Monument, another top revenue-generating attraction, has only just re-opened to the public after being shut since the pandemic.

"Visitor levels are predicted to be strong enough to come close to its income target, which alongside a recruitment freeze, has helped to alleviate the in-year budget pressure," the report adds. "The deficit from the Scott Monument, however, presents an ongoing challenge.

"Alongside this, inflation and increased employee costs contribute to the reported pressure.

"As a result of the recruitment freeze, there have been instances of reactive museum closures as staffing levels have dipped below the minimum required to maintain a full service. This has been exacerbated by sickness absence and annual leave.

"To contain the budget deficit by March 2025, officers are recommending that changes are made to the opening hours of two Museums: People's Story and Queensferry Museum."

It's proposed the People's Story Museum will close "on a seasonal and temporary basis through the autumn and winter months 2024/25, reopening in April 2025".

"Queensferry Museum was a shared operational service with Registrars, who have since vacated the building, and operating the museum floor has become more challenging.

"It is proposed that Queensferry Museum temporarily moves to an appointment-based service on specified days to enable

school visits, and a regular time for residents and visitors to access the collections. Officers will maintain education and outreach work in the area, such as the Bridges 60th Anniversary project, and engage with local community groups to examine future service models.”

Council officials have assessed alternative options, including keeping all attractions open but only opening five days a week, reduced from six. However they say as staff are contracted according to the council’s terms and conditions and work to fixed rotas and contracted days these changes “would take approximately four months to enact”.

The report states: “Rolling closures are possible but will create further negative impacts on income.

“Officers will examine alternative operating and staffing models to design solutions for a more consistent service that keeps all venues open from April 2025 while keeping within budget parameters, as well as engaging with the Queensferry community to examine future provision in the area.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter