

FALKIRK COUNCIL

Subject: THE HELIX : VISITOR BUILDING
Meeting: EXECUTIVE
Date: 3 FEBRUARY 2015
Author: DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform Members of a proposed extension to the Helix visitor building which can be facilitated by varying the contract awarded to Maxi Construction Ltd. in December 2014. As Members may recall, approval was sought for the award of this contract to Balfour Beattie Ltd. in February last year, however Balfour Beattie withdrew from the contract before the letter of acceptance was issued to them. At that time a value engineering exercise was undertaken to reduce the cost of the building and details of the fit-out of the building finalised. A new procurement process for the building commenced in August last year which resulted in the award to Maxi Construction. Work started on site on the £1.1m contract on 19th January this year and is due for completion on 22 June. An additional 4-6 weeks fit out will then be required to prepare the building for the public opening date which is currently anticipated to be at the end of the first week in August.
- 1.2 Visitor numbers to the Helix, and the Kelpies in particular, have far exceeded expectations in the first year of opening of the facility which were estimated at 350,000 per year. Up to the end of September some 680,000 visitors visited the site and it is projected that in the first full year that the Helix is open (up to end March 2015) visitor numbers will exceed 950,000. Falkirk Community Trust have also reported significantly increased trading activity during this period
- 1.3 In common with any new attraction, visitor numbers are expected to drop off slightly during the first few years of operation. However it is anticipated that annual numbers will be in excess of 700,000 which is double the original expectation. It is estimated that one in seven visitors will make use of the visitor building which gives a range of visits between 105,000 and 140,000 each year. The Trust have confirmed that interventions will be undertaken to boost visitor numbers which include an enhanced events programme from 2016/17 onwards.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Members will recall that the Helix project brief originally provided, amongst other things, a limited visitor facility to be sited near the Kelpies. The proposal envisaged a very modest facility comprising public conveniences and a small office.
- 2.2 Following successful efforts by the Council and Scottish Canals in attracting significant additional external funding, it has been possible to provide an enhanced visitor building comprising a visitor reception area, retail space, a restaurant area and kitchen, catering for 100 seated internally and 40 externally, a visitor interpretation area and staff offices.
- 2.3 As a result of the substantial increase in visitor numbers and advice from experts in tourist attractions, it is clear that, to improve the customer experience and thus maximise the commercial opportunity offered by the visitor building, enhanced retail and circulation space should be provided in the building along with appropriate stock storage and staff facilities.

3.0 PROPOSAL

- 3.1 The proposal, therefore, is for the building to be extended. This additional space and some internal reconfiguration will provide the elements described in paragraph 2.3 above.
- 3.2 Using rates contained in the existing contract with Maxi, the cost consultants for the Helix project have estimated the cost of the extension at £140,000. Professional fees of approximately £20k have to be added giving a total cost of £160,000. It is anticipated that the works will add 7 weeks to the build programme resulting in a contract completion date of 10 August.
- 3.3 The 4-6 week Trust fit-out subsequent to building completion will result in a likely opening date for the visitor building at the end of September which would be in time for the October school holiday week.
- 3.4 The Trust have confirmed that the current scheduled completion date for the visitor building (in August) is in the peak visitor season when the resources should all be directed toward customer experience and service. By rescheduling the opening of the building, more appropriate time will be available outside the peak months to enable staff to be more familiar with its set up and operation which will allow the Trust to resolve any early issues. The ideal opening time for a new visitor facility is in the quieter months from October to March. Having the indoor visitor building open in the late autumn will significantly improve the winter visiting experience especially around the Christmas holidays.
- 3.5 In the meantime, the Trust will continue to have temporary visitor facilities on site. This will include a ticket office, enhanced retail offer and public toilets all located at the Kelpies car park. Temporary catering provision is also planned to be provided, ideally reflecting the Scotland Year of Food and Drink which will seek to showcase outstanding Scottish produce wherever possible. In addition, the success of programmes led by tour guides will be developed further in 2015 to provide memorable visits throughout the summer tourism season.

4.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 None

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The additional construction cost of the extension to the visitor building, including professional fees, can be met from Falkirk Community Trust's Helix budget.

6.0 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 None.

7.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 None.

8.0 CONCLUSION

- 8.1 The substantial increase in visitor numbers and advice from tourism experts have indicated the need for an enhanced visitor experience and increased commercial opportunities for the visitor building by extending the existing facility.
- 8.2 When completed the building will be an invaluable resource in supporting the success of the Helix project and will help ensure overall sustainability of The Kelpies and The Helix as a visitor attraction, as well as a key community asset.

9.0 RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Members :

- 9.1 **Note the contents, and agree the proposals, contained in this report.**

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Director of Development Services
16th January 2015

Contact Officer: Robert McMaster, Ext 4953

LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. Tender documents – not for publication