

Committee(s):	Date(s):
Culture, Heritage and Libraries Committee	28 October 2013
Subject: Weddings at Keats House	Public
Report of: Director of Culture, Heritage and Libraries	For Decision
Summary	
<p>In order to raise additional income, Keats House has applied to be approved as a premise for marriage and civil partnership ceremonies. This report sets out proposals for how such ceremonies would be managed in order to protect Keats House and its collection, maximise income and minimise disruption to visitors and local residents.</p> <p>Following your Committee's agenda circulation date this report will be considered by the Keats House Consultative Committee on 18 October 2013 and the views of local residents will be heard at a meeting on 23 October 2013. These meetings will inform this report further and enable an update providing a fuller picture to be presented to your meeting.</p>	
Recommendation(s)	
<p>Members are requested to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decide on how the current application for a weddings license for Keats House should be taken forward. 	

Main Report

Background

1. Keats House has never been licensed for weddings before. However it hosts a variety of private hire events, which have included a wedding reception in the past. Keats House also offers a regular and vibrant programme of around ten to fifteen public events per month, during daytimes, evenings and weekends. These include literary events, musical and theatrical performances, garden parties, late openings, family days and the annual Keats Festival.
2. At previous Keats House Consultative Committee Meetings, including 18 September 2012 and 5 February 2013, wedding ceremonies were identified as a potential source of income for the house, to be pursued by the new Principal Curator, Vicky Carroll, when she was in post.
3. It is desirable for Keats House to increase its earned income through a variety of income streams in order to help close an existing funding gap, increase Keats House's resilience against potential future funding cuts, and to enable the House to offer a competitive and genuinely engaging public programme. (Other income streams being pursued simultaneously include fundraising through the Keats Foundation and improvement of the retail offer).

4. The museum and gallery sector is increasingly finding that weddings are a means of maximising the use of their heritage assets and generating significant amounts of income in a way which requires a relatively small input of staff and financial resource.
5. The Principal Curator therefore submitted an application to the London Borough of Camden for Keats House and 10 Keats Grove to become approved premises for marriage and civil partnership ceremonies in July 2013. Local residents were notified via members of the Keats House Consultative Committee and were invited to attend an open meeting to raise any concerns and make suggestions for how weddings could best be managed to minimise disruption for them.
6. Local residents raised a number of concerns at the meeting and subsequently via correspondence, primarily regarding:
 - a. Noise disturbance, especially from wedding receptions
 - b. Parking
 - c. The security and care of the house and the collection
 - d. Impact on the experience of Keats House visitors
 - e. That some local residents were not made aware of the plans so were unable to contribute to the discussion
7. These issues have considered carefully and plans and options have been developed to address them.
8. In addition, several letters of support have been received from local residents.
9. The Keats Community Library has adopted a neutral stance on the issue, since the committee do not believe that weddings will have a significant impact on the Library or its users.

Current Position

10. Due to the level of local concern, the licence application has been placed on hold whilst further input is sought from the Keats House Consultative Committee and local residents.
11. Subject to the outcome of discussions with the Consultative Committee and local residents, it is proposed that a decision paper will be submitted to the Culture Heritage and Libraries Committee on 28 October 2013.

Options

Options considered for the wedding offer

12. A full wedding service, as offered by a many museums and historic houses including nearby Burgh House, would include options for the ceremony itself plus a catered reception including music and dancing until late in the evening. Properties with gardens sometimes allow marquees to be erected in the grounds to increase the reception capacity).
13. The primary benefit of offering a full wedding service is that this maximises the amount of income which can be generated through venue hire, plus the subcontracting of catering and other services. It also suits a wide range of potential customers.

14. Drawbacks include a risk of noise disturbance or of damage to the premises if a reception is not appropriately managed. Coordinating a full wedding service would require a considerable input of staff resource.
15. An alternative – developed in response to residents’ concerns – would be to offer a restricted service whereby couples could have their ceremony followed by a drinks toast at Keats House, total time two hours, before moving on elsewhere for a full reception. Wedding events would end by 9pm.
16. Keats House would make less money per event. However, benefits include a significantly reduced risk of noise disturbance, plus less demand on existing staff resources.

Options considered for timings

17. To maximise the number of weddings, and therefore income, one option would be to close Keats House on occasion, or regularly, for wedding ceremonies. This approach is taken by Burgh House, which is closed every Saturday because it is required to make a very significant portion of its income from weddings. The main drawback is that this would reduce public access to the house and the collection.
18. An alternative would be to make weddings fit around the opening hours of Keats House (Summer: Tuesday to Sunday 1-5pm; Winter: Friday to Sunday 1-5pm). Ceremonies in Keats House itself could take place in the mornings up until 1pm, after 5pm, or in the Chester Room only during public opening hours (the room is currently closed on occasion for events and private hire so this would not be a significant change). In the Nightingale Room, weddings could take place in the early evenings and in the daytime when Keats House has use of the room (Wednesdays, Thursdays or Sundays). Arrangements would be agreed with the KCL Committee.

Options considered for frequency and pricing

19. Some wedding venues aim to be competitively priced and market their offer heavily so that they can attract large numbers of weddings, maximising income that way. This appears to be the approach taken by Burgh House, which is heavily reliant on income from private hire.
20. Since Keats House is such an extraordinary and romantic venue, and since we would not wish to hold large numbers of weddings due to residents concerns, staff capacity and public opening requirements, an alternative would be to host a small number of exclusive, luxury weddings that are priced accordingly.

Proposals

21. It is proposed that:
22. Keats House will hold another open meeting, to which all residents of Keats Grove, Keats Close, Heath Hurst Road and Downshire Hill will be invited to find out more about the plans, raise concerns and make suggestions regarding how weddings can best be managed to minimise disruption to local residents.
23. Subject to the outcome of the public meeting, it is proposed that Keats House will offer a restricted wedding service, where couples can hire the Nightingale

Room or the Chester Room for their ceremony followed by a drinks toast, with the whole event taking no more than two hours and to be finished by 9pm.

24. The maximum capacity for a ceremony in Keats House would be 42; in the Nightingale Room it would be 100. This is in accordance with the fire risk assessment for the buildings.
25. As the Keats House garden is such a key asset it is proposed that couples will be able to use the garden for either their ceremony (the couple themselves would have to be situated under the fixed veranda) or their drinks toast.
26. Only live background music, such as a string quartet, will be permitted indoors or outside. We would not consent to either live bands or amplified rock music.
27. Marquees will not be allowed, but couples may hire the Keats House gazebo (which is used for other events) as a precaution in case of poor weather.
28. Ceremonies may be booked for any day of the week, including weekends, beginning no earlier than 10am and finishing no later than 9pm. However the specific timings and the number of bookings in a year will be restricted.
29. Keats House will not be closed to the public in order to conduct weddings. Bookings for ceremonies Keats House itself will fit around public opening hours, primarily taking place on closed days, before 1pm or after 5pm.
30. It is envisaged that couples will not generally want to get married at a time when the house is open to the public. However, if a couple so desire, a ceremony may be booked in the Chester Room during public opening hours provided that the Principal Curator is confident that this would not cause disruption to the general visitor experience. This may be particularly appropriate for very small wedding groups. The room has its own entrance/exit to the garden. Currently, the Chester Room is sometimes closed to the public for special events or private hire.
31. The Keats Community Library and the Children's Library will not be closed to conduct wedding ceremonies. Bookings for ceremonies in the Nightingale Room will only be made for times when Keats House already has use of the room for public events and private hire. Management arrangements for ceremonies will be agreed with the KCL Trustees to minimise the impact on Library users. The KCL trustees do not object to Keats House's plan to hold wedding ceremonies in the Nightingale Room.
32. The fabric of Keats House and the collection will not be placed at risk. This is of paramount importance. Keats House has very significant experience of hosting a wide variety of public events, celebrations and private hire with up to 100 guests, including events where alcohol is served. We therefore already have procedures for ensuring the protection and security of the house and the collection during such events (for example, restrictions on where food and drink are allowed, white wine only inside the house, ensuring adequate supervision of events, and so on). These will form part of the hire agreement with couples and will be implemented during weddings as they are at all events.
33. As Keats House does not have a Premises Licence for the sale of alcohol, couples would have to provide their own alcohol. However Keats House could apply a corkage and service charge (or include this within the overall cost).

34. In response to concerns from local residents, it is proposed that a cap of 30 weddings per year is imposed.
35. However, given that this is a new development, and that administrating wedding enquiries, bookings and events will place additional demands on the existing small staff team, it is proposed that we aim to book up to 6-8 weddings in 2014 and 10-12 in 2015. More than 10-12 weddings per year would likely require additional staff resource to coordinate the publicity and administration.
36. Benchmarking of other Camden wedding venues and comparable historic properties suggests that a hire charge of £2,000 for a ceremony and drinks toast (excluding registrar's fees and drinks) would place Keats House at the high end of the pricing spectrum for venues of similar capacity, without being unreasonable for a couple set on securing a unique and exclusive venue.
37. Below are approximate costs for venue hire for a ceremony plus drinks reception, 2 hours in total, for between 40 to 100 people, excluding catering and registrar's fees. (NB that as some venues offer set packages, the exact offer may vary.)
 - Burgh House £550
 - Lauderdale House: £900
 - Kenwood House: £3500 (5 hours venue hire)
 - Tower Bridge: £2,400 (includes full day hire and 10 bottles champagne for 25/50 guest's max)
 - Ambassadors Bloomsbury Hotel: £800 (ceremony only)
 - William Morris Gallery: £1500 (3 hours, 50 guests max)
38. It is proposed to set the initial hire price at £2000, since there is not a requirement to attract large numbers of bookings and we wish to maximise income from the small number of exclusive weddings that we host. We propose having the same price for the Chester Room or the Nightingale Room as the former is more characterful whilst the latter is larger. A £500 deposit will be required against damage or cleaning costs.
39. Weddings will always be supervised by a duty manager with the assistance of at least one additional member of staff. Additional staffing cost approx. £150 per ceremony.
40. Additional costs for, e.g. laundering chair covers and other sundry costs estimated at up to £100 per ceremony. In the first year, investment of approximately £1,000 will be required to purchase equipment and materials such as including chair covers and glasses.
41. The wedding offer will be marketed through the Camden registry service, on the City of London website and through Keats House's connections with the literary community, who may be particularly interested in the venue. Additional advertisements may be placed if required. Approximate marketing cost £1,500 per year.
42. The projected net income from wedding ceremonies is therefore estimated at:
 - 2014: £8,000 - £11,500

2015: £16,000 - £19,500

43. This level of income would, for example, enable us to continue to hold a Keats Festival in 2015 (by which time it is likely that funding will no longer be available from the Keats House charitable reserves).
44. Couples will be advised that no parking is available and they should advise their guests to take public transport or taxis. This is common for London wedding venues and works well at Burgh House, where there are similar issues.
45. Once arrangements are agreed, terms and conditions will be drawn up with assistance from the City Solicitor.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

46. This proposal follows from the Keats House business plan, which has an objective to increase income generation.

Implications

47. The main risk associated with this proposal is that it may have a negative effect on the relationship between Keats House and a significant number of residents living in neighbouring properties. To mitigate this, local residents are being listened to and all of their main concerns are being addressed. Due to the heavily restricted nature of the wedding service being offered, and the fact that Keats House is very experienced in hosting frequent public events, it is very unlikely that any noticeable disruption will in fact be caused by weddings. Comparison with Burgh House, which experienced a very similar reaction from local residents when it first set out to host wedding ceremonies and full-scale receptions, offers hope that ultimately residents will come to accept or even actively support the house as a wedding venue.

Conclusion

48. The staff and management of Keats House believe that holding occasional, exclusive wedding ceremonies at Keats House will be an efficient and appropriate way of earning much-needed income to support the upkeep of the house and enable it to deliver a strong and engaging public events programme, thereby fulfilling our charitable objective of being a 'live memorial' to John Keats.
49. It is recognised that there are concerns amongst owners of neighbouring properties about, especially, noise and parking and in response we propose to offer a restricted but very special wedding ceremony service which will generate income whilst absolutely minimising the risk of any disturbance to local residents.

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