

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000

Your request for information has now been considered and the Council's response to your questions is shown below.

You asked:

I understand Belgrave Hall is to be closed to the public from the end of October 2012.

ANSWER

Clarification

Before responding to these questions I need to clarify that Belgrave Hall is not closing to the public. We are very sorry that you are under the impression that it is closing, since we are further investing in improving facilities and presentation there, and focussing on promoting special events and activities for all age groups, at the same time as developing other income generating uses. Improvement works will be undertaken during our normal winter closure and then when we reopen in the Spring there will be a change from regular opening hours every week to a greater number of special events throughout the season than we have previously offered. These will feature our most popular events, such as the annual food and drink fair, as well as other new activities. In this way we hope we will eventually attract at least the same numbers of users as we do currently. This change means our visitors will be able to experience an improved "historic building" attraction, which will be better advertised than it is currently, but still essentially the same much-loved house and gardens.

Most museum visitors typically come three or four times per year, and so we hope that this will provide plenty of opportunity for existing and new visitors, young and old, to explore the delights of this wonderful site. We appreciate that this is a change, but it is being done because we care about Belgrave Hall and gardens and we want people to continue to enjoy them. This change will enable us to improve presentation and advertising, and help ensure this site has a sustainable, successful future.

Can you please tell me:

1. What consultation there was with Leicester residents?

At the time the plans were announced in June a range of local organisations were contacted and the proposals discussed with them, as well as with both Ward Councillors. There was also a presentation to the Heritage Leisure and Sport Scrutiny Committee on August 8th. There was media coverage both at the time of the announcement and of the Scrutiny Committee. One outstanding action on the original communication plan is a presentation at the Belgrave Ward Committee, which has proved difficult to schedule but will happen as soon as possible. We are delighted to learn that a Belgrave Hall Conservation Area Society has recently been set up (We provided space at

Belgrave Hall free of charge for its two meetings so far) and so we hope to include this organisation in our ongoing discussions.

2. What changes will be made to the grounds to accommodate the proposed events facilities?

The only item planned at present is creation of a space for a marquee. However the size of this and its location will be carefully managed because the beauty of the gardens is one of the hall's main attractions for customers and we would obviously not wish to detract from this. The grounds are in a conservation area and within the curtilage of a listed building, and whilst some areas of the garden do need to be sensitively pruned in any case over the winter, it has some important individual specimen trees. We are therefore carrying out a survey of the grounds to locate an appropriate space, and also a wildlife survey.

3. Whether there is any possibility of a postponement of the closure to enable the newly-formed Belgrave Hall Area Conservation Society to meet with representatives of LCC to explore alternative options

Belgrave Hall is not going to close. We are really sorry that this is the impression some people have got. Below, we provide for clarity the text of the press release issued on June 26. However we very much look forward to discussing our plans for Belgrave Hall and our next events programme with the Belgrave Hall Area Conservation Society in due course.

The plans... will also mean major changes to the way Belgrave Hall and Gardens operates. This will close to the public in October for refurbishment before reopening as a heritage venue in Spring 2013. The refurbishment will be supported by Arts Council England funding. The hall - which currently opens from February to October and had around 16,000 visitors last year - will no longer house a permanent museum collection but will continue to open to the public with an annual programme of open days, events and festivals. These will make full use of the hall and garden, as well as a new marquee area linking the two. Following refurbishment, the hall and gardens will also be marketed as a venue for hire for private functions and commercial activities such as craft markets, food fairs, ghost watches and other events. This will be in addition to a regular public programme.

Peter Soulsby said: "Belgrave Hall is a wonderful but woefully underused building, and its beautiful gardens are a real attraction. These plans will allow visitors to enjoy and appreciate the building as an artefact in its own right. The plans will also allow us to maximise the commercial and visitor opportunities that the hall and gardens present. The house was empty when the council purchased it in the 1920s. We don't need to fill it with items from the museum collection that have no connection to the site for people to enjoy it."

Sarah Levitt

Head of Leicester Arts and Museums Service

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