

The Charleston Trust

Forward Plan 2013-2017

Executive Summary

The Forward Plan prepares the Trust to renew its accredited museum status with Arts Council England in 2013 and sets the scope and direction for the next five years. The Trust's key purpose is to inspire audiences about the art, literature and social legacy of the Bloomsbury group who made Charleston their Sussex home in the early part of the 20th century. We achieve this by preserving the spirit and historic environment of Charleston and inspiring audiences about their work.

This plan period also coincides with the patronage of Her Royal Highness, The Duchess of Cornwall, who has agreed to become Charleston's patron for the period 2013-2017.

The period will also see the completion of the Centenary Project - the culmination of a journey to safeguard and re-unite Charleston Farmhouse with the adjacent Grade II listed hay and threshing barns. The site master plan will commence with an urgently needed new access route followed by restorative landscaping plus modernised and extended visitor facilities including a flexible auditorium space, enlarged catering and retailing spaces, refurbished office accommodation, a new education studio, collection store and gallery and a new car park.

However, given that house admissions are near to capacity, Charleston cannot survive without change given that it currently relies solely on the support of two festivals and its onsite retail. By connecting to **the spirit** of the people of Bloomsbury, Charleston has the opportunity to diversify its activities and points of focus to include areas such as innovation, iconoclasm, dance, music, happiness and ways of living.

The Centenary Project enables Charleston to offer a greatly improved, more comfortable experience to the thousands of visitors who come to the house each season but is an enormous organisational challenge, the scale of which has not been seen since Charleston was saved when the Trust was founded. However, the Centenary Project will allow the Trust to offer a year-round public programme, foster creative innovation and extend its trading capacity – vital to secure a sustainable future.

Long-term financial sustainability is essential and must be fully integrated within all of the Trust's activities and seen as a top priority for the organisation. Visitor numbers in 2012 declined by 14% and both shop and café sales saw a decline in 2012. Whilst good progress has been made in building relationships with small to medium scale corporate partners, the Trust must stimulate individual giving, grow its trading and utilise strong cost control to become financially sustainable in a challenging economic climate.

The fundraising climate will remain challenging for the foreseeable future with significant pressure on Arts Council England as well as trust and foundation funding sources due to the poor economic environment. After the Centenary Project is completed, numbers of visitors to the house will remain limited to a maximum of 25,000 annually with access also remaining at seven months of the year in order to conserve the fragile interiors.

Access to the collection will be enhanced by helping users to explore and engage with the collection online, via new permanent interpretation displays, a gallery space for temporary displays drawn from the Angelica Garnett Gift, and our pre-existing collection.

Charleston must use social media even more effectively to link us to new and existing audiences year-round. Immediate priorities will be local communities, local heritage and the local environment.

By 2017, Charleston will extend its reach and profile beyond traditional audiences - attracting visitors who want access to interesting activities, learning opportunities, high quality catering and shopping or a day out in the National Park.

Charleston is known for its annual May Festival, which has a solid, loyal core audience of members, and to a lesser extent for Small Wonder (the annual short story festival) and our education and learning programmes. Charleston's programme of exhibitions, creative workshops, talks, walks and events need to appeal more strongly to those interested in developing their own creative skills and learning about a wide range of arts and cultural themes. Indeed, the range and ambition of the public programme must grow in response to the new auditorium and in order to create a year-round season of learning opportunities both at Charleston and via touring and partnering elsewhere. Clearly the way in which Charleston manages the entire programme across all parts of the site must reflect this change, together with a clear contemporary identity through its artistic and literary programmes.

Charleston's operating model will be transformed through this period to ensure it has the right level of professional expertise, systems, procedures and staff with the necessary qualities to deliver this enhanced vision. The values that drive how the Trust runs its charitable and enterprise activities will remain constant - a strong belief in the value of creativity and conservation, doing business ethically, striving to be world class, and caring for our audiences.

The Charleston Trust is committed to making Charleston a more sustainable organisation and has produced an Environmental Sustainability Policy to guide The Trust's work to reduce our energy use and improve our carbon footprint.

Charleston is a place within which the spirit of volunteering will remain critical to future success and which is guided by our Volunteer agreement. It

is a place which is committed to research, education and learning, and creating opportunities for visitors to indulge their curiosity. Charleston's location within the newly created South Downs National Park together with East Sussex County Council's focus on developing high value tourism also present opportunities to attract park visitors to our site and extend awareness of our offering.