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Executive Summary:

The following report was carried out by the sudden onset emergency team in response to the change in strategic direction of Hilton Court to focus solely on the wedding side of the business. This change coincided with the owner's decision to retire, which was also influenced by the difficulties which affected the business during the Covid-19 pandemic. The focus of the team was to discover innovative ways forward to creative customer care. The team first carried out a SWOT and PESTEL Analysis of the business. The SWOT Analysis highlighted strengths in customer service such as high review ratings online, as well as the opportunity to take advantage of new technologies. The PESTEL Analysis took into account external influences on customer care including such as changes in social behaviour due to government guidance during the pandemic which is still a consideration for wedding venues today. The models for change which have been chosen are the Three Horizons and the Bullock and Batten Model of Change. The reason for these choices are that they complement each other in forming a realistic timeline to achieve and implement the recommendations. Finally, towards the end of the report is a section on customer care which links in with the previous analysis and models for change, and provides direction for the innovative customer care which Hilton Court is striving to achieve.

The highlights of the recommendations of the report are given below. However, the full list can be found at the end of the report on page 24:

1. Create Bridebook account to increase visibility to potential customers and personalise customer care through building guest profiles.

2. Survey couples previously married at the property. Analysing the findings will enable the team to specifically tailor the services of Hilton Court to future guests, and to anticipate needs in advance. This is absolutely key to ensuring the newly renovated indoor accommodation has everything the modern wedding party would wish for.
3. The main Hilton Court website must be updated with new content to reflect the change in focus for the business.
4. Investing in a 360° virtual tour of the property will help futureproof against potential future lockdowns and circumstances where guests cannot visit in-person.
5. Purchase an additional four bell tents to increase accommodation capacity to meet demand for on-site accommodation at wedding venues.
6. Purchase an additional four bell tents to bring the total up to nine.
7. Begin to plan training for a size increase in the team when the 2022 wedding season begins.

Introduction:

Hilton Court Gardens and Crafts has recently closed its doors to the general public after decades of successful business. The pandemic has had a profound impact on the business over the past two years, and 2021 has seen the momentous decision from owners Cheryl and Peter to retire (see Appendix for further background information). However, the business will continue to run as a wedding venue, with an increased capacity to host guests in on-site accommodation. This marks a pivotal moment in the company's strategic direction, one where innovative customer care will be the focus as the company homes in on the accommodation needs of future wedding parties and accompanying guests. The plans for the conversion of the Victorian courtyard into six en-suite bedrooms, plus kitchen and two indoor communal areas have already been approved, with a focus on sustainability in the form of solar panels, Hydraloop™ water recycling technology, electric car charging points and high energy efficient appliances. Renovations will commence in early February 2022, and the application for the SME Climate Commitment will be submitted before the end of December 2021 (UK Government 2021) which will make Hilton Court only the fourth business, and first wedding venue in Pembrokeshire to sign up.

The aim of this report is to detail the findings of the sudden onset emergency project team, which was created by Cheryl and Peter in response to the circumstances arising from the pandemic and their upcoming retirement. It has been a consideration for quite some time to invest in on-site accommodation, and the need for this has grown as the wedding side of the business has expanded. The 2021 UK Wedding

Report states that “more than a third (of couples) are interested in overnight rooms for the couple (41%) and guests (39%)” (Bridebook, 2021) which has reinforced the decision to expand. The focus of the team is to discover a new way forward for delivering innovative customer care alongside the new accommodation plans at a time when the pandemic remains a daily consideration, and to ensure future resilience and competitive advantage during and after this difficult time.

The sudden onset emergency project team has mainly been formed of key persons who already work within the business. The owners, who are also the main stakeholders, will have the final say on all details in the project, including major financial decisions such as budget allocation and total spend. The events manager (the owner’s daughter) is also a key contributor as she has successfully managed weddings at the venue for years, so knows the guests needs and specific attention which needs to be paid to paving the way to more creative customer care during wedding functions, particularly regarding the previous limitation on accommodation. The new role of accommodation manager has been created for the purpose of planning and overseeing the details of the renovations, with the long-term plan of remaining in the role to manage the accommodation arrangements once it is fit and ready for guests. The marketing manager has also been included in the team, as new marketing and promotional material will need to be produced and promoted throughout and after the change in strategic direction (this is my role).

Main findings of strategic analysis and critical evaluation of the strategic options:

As the new direction for Hilton Court will be to focus on weddings, it is appropriate to mention the new vision the owners wish to achieve in this new venture. The aim is for Hilton Court to become renowned as a Welsh outdoor/garden destination wedding venue, rather than just a successful Pembrokeshire one. The cost and complexity of destination weddings abroad has risen due to the pandemic, and more couples are choosing to marry in the UK in the face of continuing changes to Covid-19 restrictions. Purephotoni (2021) summarised that from The UK Wedding Report 2021 that “garden/Outdoor weddings saw a good increase in popularity” from previous years in 2020 which is positive news for Hilton Court.

SWOT Analysis:

A SWOT Analysis has been carried out as a starting point to identify areas of strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat to the business.

The questions in the SWOT analysis have been taken from the Mindtools website (Mindtools, 2021) and utilised for this purpose.

Strengths:

What do you do well?

- Customer Service is ranked consistently high online: 4.9/5 on Facebook (Hilton Court, 2019) and 4.5/5 on Tripadvisor (Tripadvisor, 2021).

What unique resources can you draw on?

- A key draw for guests is that Hilton Court is one of the only completely outdoor wedding venues in Pembrokeshire, with the woodland and pond setting, along with the wedding marquee, it makes for an attractive option. The business has always had a very sustainable ethos and care for the environment which has been appreciated by previous guests.

What do others see as your strengths?

- Strong support from the local community, and care and attention to detail in order to personalise each wedding experience.

Weaknesses:

What could you improve?

- Accommodation for guests is a necessity now that the focus of the business is turning solely to weddings.

Where do you have fewer resources than others?

- Accommodation. Currently Hilton Court owns five bell tents, otherwise guests must source their own accommodation or bring their own tents. However, this is soon to change with the renovations beginning in 2022.
- Online presence on social medias and specifically tailored wedding sites.

What are others likely to see as weaknesses?

- Previously not offering more accommodation options may have been an off-putting factor for potential guests, and bookings may not have been secured as a result.

Opportunities:**What opportunities are open to you?**

- Improvement of existing website and increase of followers on social media platforms.

What trends could you take advantage of?

- Utilising the trend of 360° virtual tours would be beneficial in promoting the venue to a wider audience and to futureproof against circumstances where guests are unable to travel to an in person tour (such as a lockdown).
- There has also been a trend for a greater number of outdoor weddings which Hilton Court could capitalise on, especially as social distancing and mask wearing guidelines are still in place (Welsh Government, 2021).

How can you turn your strengths into opportunities?

- Ideally the customer care can be creatively developed initially through additional marketing, updating the website, increasing social media presence, following and response, and surveying previous guests in order to fine tune the details in the

new accommodation which will ensure needs are pro-actively anticipated.

Threats:

What threats could harm you?

- Future government restrictions and lockdowns.

What is your competition doing?

The project team looked at the two closest competitors in terms of distance and similarity in venue setting. However, the competition differs in that they both have well established accommodation options.

- Crug Glâs wedding venue is diversifying by creating a beauty room and offering treatments, which is a unique selling point Wedding Venues 360° (2021) have also created a 360° virtual online tour for Crug Glâs, which is something the project team wishes to invest in to emulate at Hilton Court.
- Slebech Park has recently set up a profile on Bridebook which is yet to include detailed information or receive reviews (Bridebook, 2021).

What threats do your weaknesses expose you to?

- A stagnation or decrease in bookings once the backlog of weddings from the 2020 and 2021 season have taken place.

PESTEL Analysis:

It was decided by the sudden onset emergency project team to evaluate the external factors affecting the business through a PESTEL Analysis. A PESTEL Analysis was chosen to break down the external factors which may be affecting the business now or in the future. Grant states that "The danger, however, is that continuous, systematic scanning and analysis of such a wide range of external influences is costly and may result in information overload" (2015, p. 65). He goes on to say that for analysis to lead to profits a business "must understand its customers" (2015, p. 65). However, the project team have gone further with some points of this analysis and begin touching on ideas which form the basis of the recommendations of this report.

Political	• Government guidance for continuing and potential future pandemic restrictions.
Economic	• Future financial uncertainty due to the pandemic. This affects all areas of the business. • Cost of the renovation of the Victorian courtyard to accommodation. • Cost of purchasing an additional four bell tents. The reason for this is to cater to the additional guests, as well as the main wedding party. Creatively this is a wise decision as more couples are now holding their entire wedding day in one venue, and can continue to enjoy the celebrations at breakfast with the couple the next morning.

	• Increased investment in marketing budget to promote the change in direction for the business, particularly in regard to increasing the online presence. • Cost of hiring the new Accommodation Manager, and potential expansion of the team to cater for the increase in wedding bookings
Social	• Consideration of future social distancing restrictions. • Confidence in the return of bookings, and as the business has seen over the past eighteen months this has taken time to build up again, but could be affected with the increase in cases from the Omicron variant. • The staffing crisis in hospitality as a result of the pandemic and Brexit could affect recruitment as mentioned in a BBC article online (Race, 2021). • As reported by Lux Advisor “millennials’ priorities are shifting in response to society nudging them to get on the property ladder... As it stands, it is very much ‘mortgage over marriage’”. The Office for National Statistics (2020) found in 2018 that 234,795 marriages took place in England and Wales in 2018 which was the lowest rate since 2009. This is certainly a societal shift which should not be ignored as less people marry each year. Bridebook (2021) reported that only 2% of their 2021 survey population were married in Wales in 2020. There may be several reasons for this, one of which being, that there are only 463 venues in Wales listed compared to

	7,058 venues listed in England, and the survey sample may not have been proportionate.
Technological	• Investment in updating the website (which is also an economic factor), with a focus on promoting the new accommodation as a positive addition to the venue in answer to the increased demand for on site accommodation. • Increasing the social media presence. Currently Hilton Court only has 1,349 followers on Instagram (Hilton Court, 2021), and 7,363 followers of the Facebook page (Hilton Court Gardens and Crafts, 2021). On Facebook, there are more followers than competitors Crug Glâs and Slebech Park combined, however on Instagram, Hilton Court is behind both rivals with the numbers of followers. Pinterest is also another key social media to consider as Brides' 2018 study reported that "82 percent of brides turn to social media – particularly Pinterest and Instagram... for inspiration" (Cvent, 2021). • Creating a Bridebook account to increase visibility and secure online bookings. A survey by SkiftX quoted by Cvent "found that hotel and special event venue representatives identified wedding venue sourcing websites as the most useful option among digital tools". Bridebook (2021) has key functions which help understand the business position in the market, such as the ability to track competitor performance, incorporating seasonal pricing and targeting the right clientele. Targeting the right clientele is an especially important function

	to the purpose of this report as it taps into creatively customer care and personalised service, all manageable from one place online. Filming a virtual 360° tour with Weddings Venue 360°. The increased importance of this is highlighted in The UK Wedding Report, 2021 which summarises the statistics in the study by saying that “venue-seeking couples are researching more venues. While in-person tours remain the most important tool, reviews are next... (and) video tours are growing in both viewership and importance” (Bridebook, 2021).
Environmental	- Weather can have a profound effect on the business in quieter periods because it is an outdoor venue and guests are far less likely to book outside of the traditional spring and summer wedding season. Consideration should also go in the future to renting the indoor accommodation for short term exclusive use in order to make up for this shortfall and increase the versatility of Hilton Court, particularly if restrictions on numbers of guests from different households are brought back in. - Sustainability and duty of care of the environment will continue to be a key focus (solar panels, electric charging points, water recycling system will be installed). - Reduction in waste will also be prevalent in the commodities used such as toiletries, which will also be eco-friendly.
Legal	Hilton Court already holds a marriage licence for the venue and is licenced to hold events and serve alcohol.

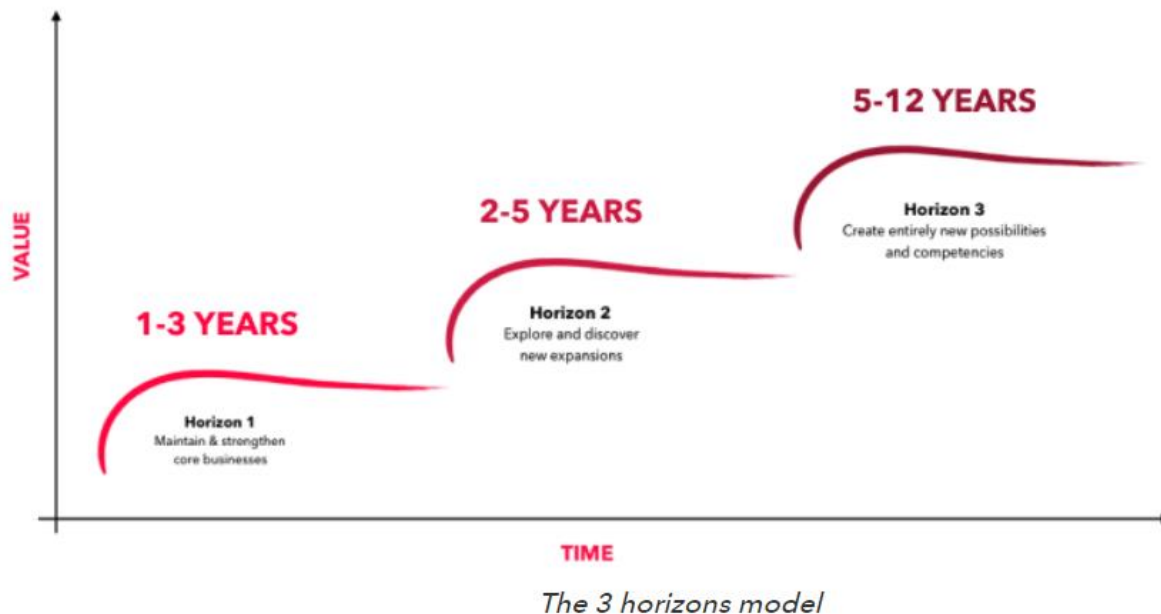
	• Hilton Court already has appropriate insurance cover for the venue and campsite, it has already been agreed to increase the cover when the Victorian Courtyard accommodation opens. • With the pandemic still causing high Covid-19 case numbers Hilton Court will continue to keep abreast of Welsh Government guidance in order to react quickly to changes.
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Models for change:

Three Horizons framework has been considered by the sudden onset emergency project team because it “continues to be useful, especially in uncertain times” (Coley, 2009). The breakdown of the business intentions into short, mid and long term aims will also work alongside the new vision to become a renowned Welsh outdoor/garden destination wedding venue; expanding on what the business has achieved locally in the past ten years.

The Three Horizons Model:

Figure 1: The Three Horizons Model first published in 1999. (de la Kethulle de Ryhove, 2021).



Hilton Court has built itself up to be a successful business over several decades, however the pandemic affected the ability to maintain and strengthen the business in its current form. The team feels that Hilton Court has already established itself as a successful local wedding venue (though albeit experiencing a long pause in 2020 and 2021) that Horizon 1 will be short term as the accommodation is renovated. However, the team acknowledges that there will always be a need to maintain and strengthen the core business, especially after re-focusing on the existing wedding aspect.

Horizon 2 is where the team sees itself on the cusp of currently, as this report in its entirety has been commissioned to explore and discover new expansions,

particularly in regard to creative customer care and metaphorically developing a new landscape for this, along with developing the physical landscape of Hilton Court. This is the time for investment, not only in additional accommodation, but also into broadening the customer base through increased marketing and attention to detail so that guests wants and needs are pre-empted rather than reacted to. It is important to note that the three horizons model being used here is only to “set or challenge a growth strategy, which will help inform an innovation strategy... (which) in turn, can help shape or challenge the growth strategy” (de la Kethulle de Ryhove, 2021). The innovations the team wishes to make are increased customer care, which will be discussed in further detail when the Bullock and Batten Model of Change is also applied for a balanced overview of how the strategic change to the company will be carried out.

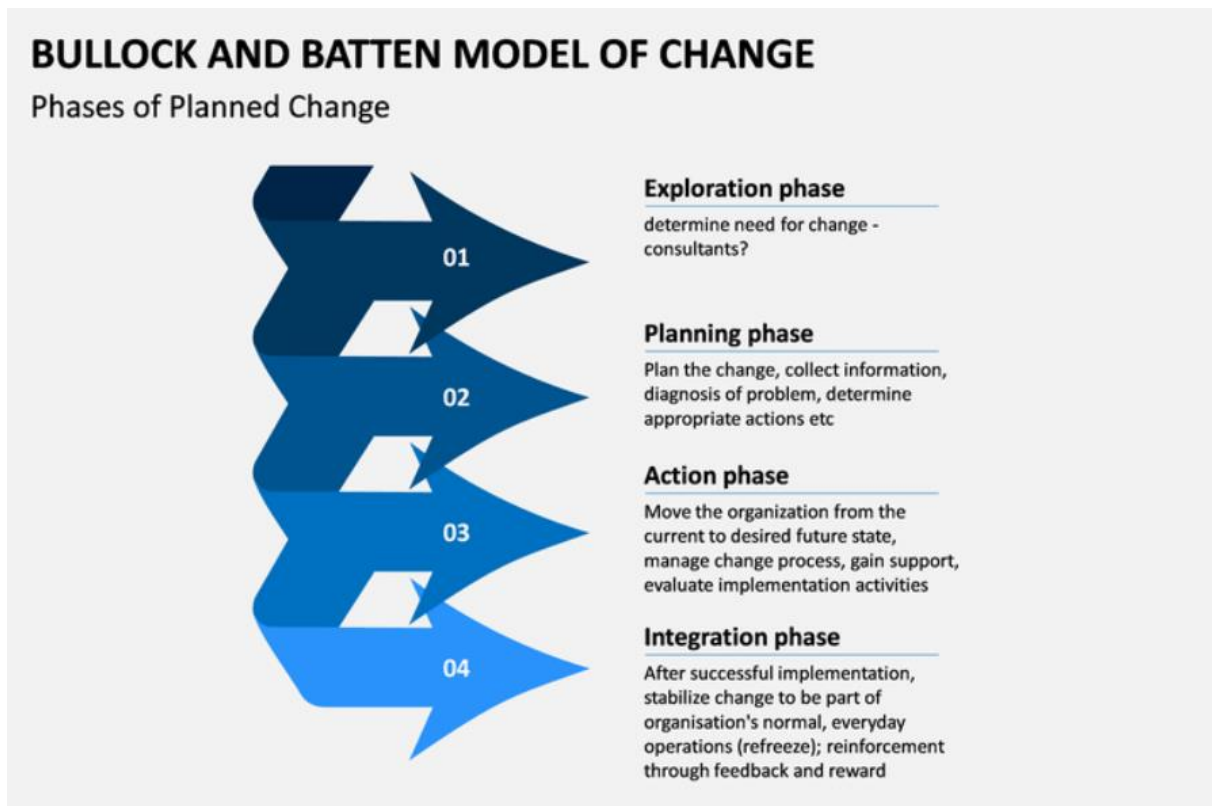
When looking at Horizon 3 it is impossible not to consider the large cost of the accommodation renovations and that this financial investment will take years to turn to profits. As Laasch puts it, (it is important to) “create viable strategic options for future – higher risk activities that may take years to generate growth and profits” (Laasch, 2021). Although the building of the new accommodation is not the key focus of this report, it does play an integral role in hosting future wedding guests. However, the team is aware that in the future, external factors such as political government lockdowns, and environmental factors such as weather may lead to further diversification, or another change of strategy for the business (whether this would be temporarily or longer term), such as short-term renting the courtyard and bell tent accommodation exclusively to families or using the existing wedding marquee to host events. By taking unexpected longer-term factors into consideration, this will help

future-proof Hilton Court against existing and unexpected threats detailed in the SWOT and PESTLE Analysis.

The Bullock and Batten Model of Change:

Bullock and Batten Model of change has been chosen because it is a good model for tackling less complex issues. Not to oversimplify the strategic changes being discussed in this report, but Hilton Court isn't a new business. The aim is to increase the accommodation capacity to see longer term gains, and in the short to mid term focus on improving the technological advancements of the business and online marketing in order to increase tailored customer care over time. Passenheim states that this model can be applied in almost any circumstance and is useful in that it distinguishes between the 'phases' which the organization passes through as it implements change" Passenheim (2010, p 14).

Figure 2: The Bullock and Batten Model of Change first published in 1985 (Sketchbubble, 2018).



Exploration Phase:

The need for change has been determined, forced to some extent by the pandemic and the owner's retirement, hence why this report was commissioned.

Planning Phase:

A SWOT and PESTEL Analysis has been carried out in this report, and recommendations of appropriate actions have been made at the end of the report.

Action Phase:

This is the phase that Hilton Court is on the verge of, and has already begun taking place, with renovation works approved to start in February 2022. The change

process should also involve the implementation of the recommendations of this report with the owner's final approval.

Integration Phase:

Once re-opened for on-the-books and new wedding business the recommendations in the review need to be integrated into every-day operations on every level. The intention is for the changes to be “supported and reinforced... results and outcomes from change communicated through the organization... continuous development of employees through training, education... ongoing monitoring and evaluation” Passenheim (2010, p. 14). Continuous development of employees is an important point as Hilton Court just has a handful of core team members, which will only expand again when the wedding season begins, so a robust training programme should be in place for newer team members to understand the vision and importance for creative and attentive customer care.

Customer Care:

In the 2020 article ‘The future of customer experience: Personalised white-glove service for all’ Agarwal, et al states that providing this service builds “deeper customer trust and loyalty... reduced need to call (and the move toward digital service capabilities has accelerated)... reduced costs... (and) increased revenue” (Agarwal, et al, 2020). This can partially be achieved through carrying forward points from the SWOT and PESTLE Analysis such as building on the existing digital foundations of the company and expanding to offer tailored and highly responsive services through a specific wedding planning platform such as Bridebook. Agarwal, et al mentions three points for change in order to achieve the higher level ‘white

glove service' discussed in the article. Through carrying out a survey of previous and potential customers Hilton Court can prevent issues before they occur by understanding guest needs for accommodation such as appropriate space to get ready, the right commodities such as enough champagne glasses and small touches such as a suitable place to hang the wedding dress. Preventing issues will also be a continuous process in the lead up to weddings, which ties in with the second point of solving problems before the customer raises them. This has been particularly prudent during the pandemic where venues have had to make decisions and attempt to solve problems before informing the guests i.e. businesses generally had a short lead time in knowledge before changes were announced to the general public so therefore could compile a list of companies who could live stream weddings to guests who could no longer attend due to government imposed limitations on numbers of attendees, or offer other solutions pro-actively. Thirdly personalising responses when customers reach out, impeccable service can be achieved by building a picture of the guest and profiling their specific needs and requirements. The way Hilton Court would hope to achieve this with the majority of bookings is through the functions on Bridebook, and through communicating directly with the guest with the same friendly and understanding approach that the business is well known for. In another article (The vision for 2025: Hyperpersonalized care and 'care of one') from the same document Amar, et al agrees that "companies that aggregate all customer information – including user attributes, behaviours, and past interactions across all channels – will be able to engage much more effectively" (Amar, et al).

While providing human customer communication and engagement will be a key success factor while everybody is in crisis mode, companies should

evaluate how to design for a true digital CX (customer experience), transforming the most used touchpoints into “experience touchpoints” ready to be deployed and operationalized. (PwC, 2020).

The statement from PwC above highlights the need for a tool which can be utilised to transform touchpoints into memorable experiences, especially as the lead time from booking a wedding venue until the actual event is usually at least a few months, and during the pandemic this has extended to over a year for many couples who postponed, and there is a lot of time in the interim to take advantage of the touchpoints and contact with guests to be able to provide an exceptionally personalised wedding day. As mentioned throughout this report and in the recommendations Bridebook is strongly recommended as the right tool in order to achieve this.

The final note on customer care is on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as it cannot go unmentioned. “Whatever the most appropriate strategic orientation, the post-Covid-19 marketplace is irrecoverably different. A key facet of this is the exponentially increased move to online communications and change.” (He and Harris, 2020). Staying accountable to the ethics of the business and impact on society and the environment will always remain a challenge, especially in these difficult times, however the care taken to develop the Hilton Court environment over decades, and commitment to sustainability in all forms will continue to be evident in the renovation, as well as that same care spilling over into attention to friendly, and personalised services with all guests.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the business is in a state of flux at this current point, with a new strategic direction. Covid-19 and constant restrictions has led the owners to commission the sudden onset emergency project team in response to the pressures of the pandemic on every aspect of the business, their decision to retire, and in advance of the 2022 wedding season. The renovation of the Victorian Courtyard is more tangible than the development of creative care that this report has focused on, and although it is a key building block in the change of focus for the business, it is just that, a building block towards the attention to detail and pre-emptive 'white glove service' that Hilton Court is striving to offer in the future. Internal factors such as cohesive teamwork and an understanding of the three horizons plan, and Bullock and Batten model for change will ensure Hilton Court achieves the new vision to become a renowned as a Welsh outdoor/garden destination wedding venue. To achieve the new vision and to also become renowned for creative and innovative customer care, the project team must now focus on implementing the following recommendations, which include a great deal of marketing and building of technological online advancements and improvements which allow for personalised service to each and every guest.

Recommendations:

The report makes the following recommendations for developing a new landscape for customer care, based on the SWOT and PESTEL Analysis carried out as part of this research:

1. Create Bridebook™ account to increase visibility to potential customers of Hilton Court as a wedding venue, and for the purpose of better managing queries, requests, and bookings. Doing so will open the potential for better and more creative care of customers. This will be the joint and continued task of the Events Manager and Marketing Manager.
2. Survey couples previously married at the property, as well as those who have already made future bookings. It is important to gain a deeper insight into the feedback of previous guests to specifically tailor the services of Hilton Court to future guests, and to anticipate needs in advance. The survey of questions will be put together by the Events, Marketing and Accommodation managers, and will focus on what guests would have needed, or wanted to see in the indoor accommodation, had it been available to them at the time. The Events manager will use the existing data on previously married couples to call or email and will inform the sudden onset emergency project team of the results. This will need to be completed in the next six weeks as the responses will inform final touch functional, decorative and commodity decisions for the renovated Victorian Courtyard accommodation. The results of the survey will be crucial to understanding what the modern wedding party require from wedding accommodation.
3. The website must be updated with new content by the Marketing Manager., particularly when the accommodation renovations begins. The website should

also include photos from previous weddings with approval from the bride and grooms who can be asked permission when the surveys in Recommendation 2 are completed. This will give an attractive visual representation of Hilton Court as a wedding venue to potential future guests.

4. The business needs to increase the social media presence on Facebook and Instagram as a starting point, and increase the number of followers. Again, the Marketing Manager will take responsibility for this, with input of photos from Events and Accommodation.
5. Virtual Tours will be able to help futureproof the venue from cancelled in person viewings in the case of further lockdowns, and will also showcase the venue to a wider audience online as the technology can be incorporated into the website, social media, and Bridebook account. The Accommodation Manager will arrange this.
6. Purchase an additional four bell tents to bring the total up to nine. This will bring the accommodation total up to thirty two adults (including the six rooms included in the renovation). This will need to be approved by the owners before purchase.
7. Begin to plan training for a size increase in the team when the 2022 wedding season begins. This will need to involve an awareness of the three horizons and Bullock and Batten model of change, as well as how to cater for the discerning guests and how to be proactive and pre-empt guest needs. Again, this will be a joint effort of the project team as training crosses all departments.

Appendix:

Background to Hilton Court:

Based in South Pembrokeshire, just below the Landsker line, Hilton Court Gardens and Crafts has been a thriving family-run business for many years. The business centres around a Victorian courtyard with independent shops, busy restaurant and garden centre, and meandering gardens for the visiting public with an additional tearoom. The business has always done better seasonally in the summer and around Christmas, and this is very much in keeping with the county of Pembrokeshire as a whole. As a result, there have been a maximum of 30 full time and part-time staff on the payroll during the peak times.

45 years ago Peter & Cheryl took on Hilton court with a rundown, derelict courtyard & 34 acres of agricultural land... they started the transformation from wasteland to wonderland including converting the courtyard, landscaping the gardens and planting thousands & thousands of trees and shrubs. (Hilton Court Gardens and Crafts, 2021).

In the past ten years the business began to market itself as a wedding venue locally and has hosted many successful outdoor weddings. Originally there was no accommodation on-site for the wedding party or guests, so partnerships were formed with local hotels, campsites and bed and breakfasts. However, adapted over time, and couples were able to add limited accommodation options to their package in the form of luxury bell tents (which were outsourced at first, but the business now owns five of their own), or pay per pitch where guests could bring their own tents to the venue. As the wedding side of the business grew, it felt prudent to develop the accommodation aspect further, particularly as the owners were nearing retirement,

and wanted to focus on one aspect of their business rather than juggle many smaller businesses under the umbrella of Hilton Court Gardens and Crafts. During the 2020 and 2021 lockdowns due to Covid-19, the business suffered financial losses from decreased revenue in this time period, continuous running costs, and stock which was unable to be sold. After the summer of 2020, the difficult decision was made to close the restaurant in the main courtyard. Then, after the summer of 2021 the owners decided to close Hilton Court to the visiting public, and thus close all businesses on-site in order to focus on future wedding bookings, and developing this side of the business further with a view to providing accommodation options for the wedding parties and guests.

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