

APPENDICES

Museum Service Forward Plan 2013 - 2018

Appendix 1

Organisational Structure : Corporate Services / Museum Service

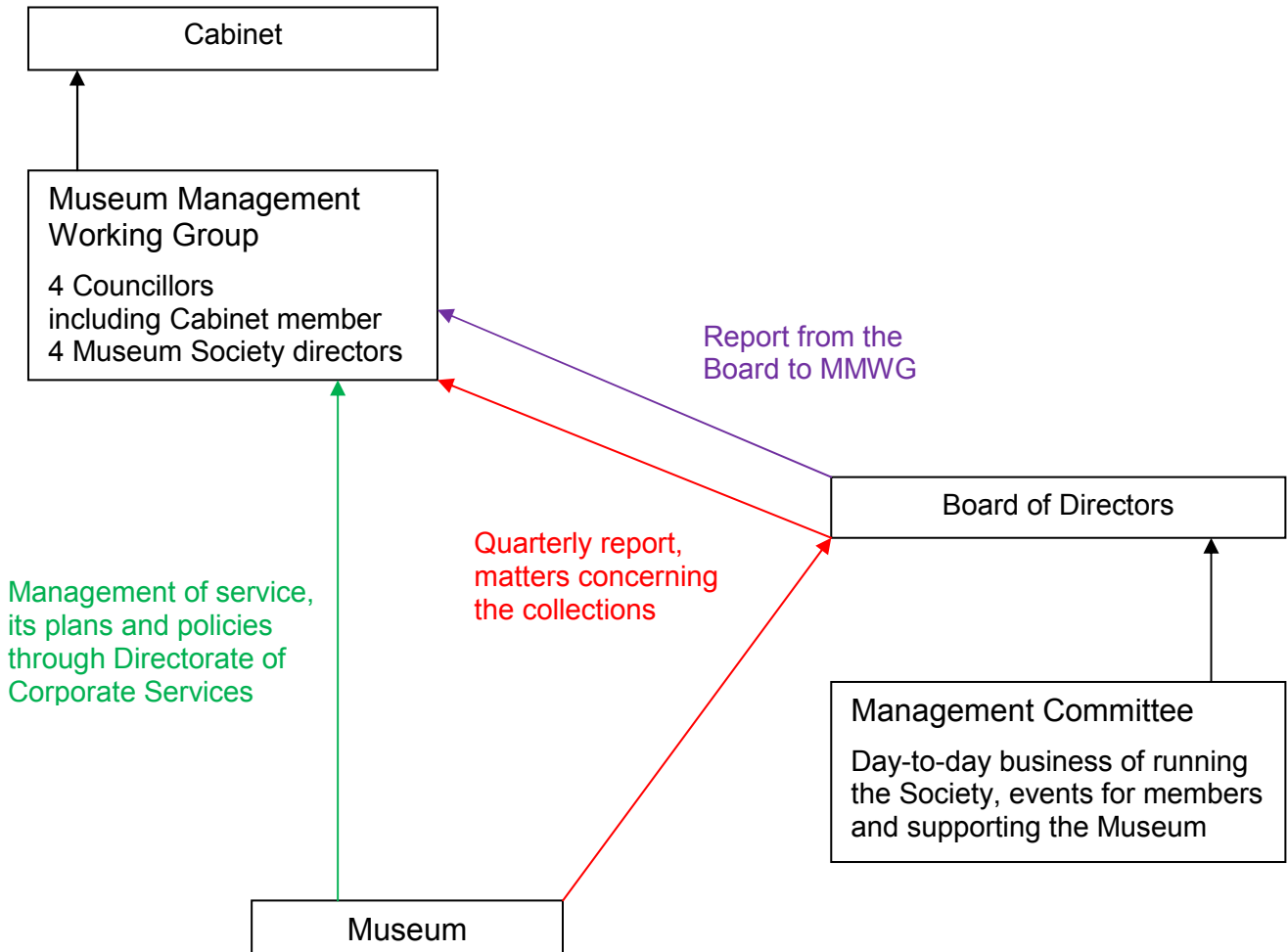
[Insert organisational chart from Intranet]

Appendix 2 Governance Structure for Museum : Uttlesford District Council and Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd

Showing reporting structure for governance of the Museum Service

Uttlesford District Council

Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd



Appendix 3 Analysis of the Environment

This section presents:

1. A 'snapshot' of the Museum Service – its collections, buildings, human resources and current budget
2. A brief appraisal of the Museum Service (SWOT)
3. A broader consideration of the environment in which the Museum Service now operates (PESTEL)

Collections

Estimated at around 175,000 objects and specimens (total below + allowance as documentation projects nearly always result in an increase). Local archaeological collections will be considerably updated by the intake of finds and records from recent excavations in the district as soon as the new store is operational. Equally, moving to better storage accommodation will help with the research, sorting and rationalisation of older collections but this is a very time-consuming process.

Human History	Social & Local History	55,500
	Decorative arts (Ceramics & Glass)	2,460
	Archaeology	40,000
	World Cultures (Ethnography)	4,000
Natural Sciences	Natural History	52,653
	Geology	17,273

The return of around 120 items currently on display in the 'Worlds of Man' (world cultures) gallery to the Cuming Museum over the next 2-3 years (long term loan) will lead to the re-display of this gallery in due course.

Buildings

Museum Street, Saffron Walden (sharing grounds with castle keep and Castle Hill Tennis Club)	Museum Grade II listed building purpose-built museum 1835	1,218 m ² (excl. cellars and roofspace)
	Schoolroom - former Museum Street School (Museum Society)	138 m ²
	Workshop	22 m ²
Council depot, Newport	Off-site store (UDC)	342 m ² (total both floors)
Hempstead	Museum Society member's barn (private ownership) – vehicles need to be removed	4 horse-drawn vehicles

There is also the Curator's house in Castle Street and its garage in Museum Court.

Collections are therefore spread between several locations (Museum, Schoolroom and Newport store, and Hempstead) and staff have to work between several buildings. With reduced staffing levels, and public opening hours to be maintained 365 days of the year,

consolidation is needed. The Museum Street site is unsuitable for a large off-site store but moving off-site storage from Newport into Saffron Walden would help. The functions of the Workshop could be incorporated in an extended and improved Museum building, so that the Security Officer and other staff need not leave the main building to use it.

Human resources

Council employees 5.9 FTEs	Permanent staff 5.5 FTEs	Curator
		Visitor & Learning Services Officer
		Natural Sciences Officer
		Documentation & Exhibitions Officer
		Conservation Officer
		Security Officer p/t
	Saturday Assistant (reception, 6hrs per wk)	
Volunteers Approx 2.5 FTEs but varies (more for activities and events)	Casual Assistants Approx 0.4 FTE	Currently 6, to assist with weekend and bank hol opening, and extra stewarding as required
	Desk Volunteers	About 30 on a rota for reception desk Mon-Fri, and Sun / Bank hol afternoons
	Learning services	Currently 3 volunteers assisting V&LS Officer
	Collections care and admin tasks	Currently 6 volunteers regularly assisting in these areas, with other short-term work placements from time to time

In addition: considerable amount of voluntary time from Museum Society directors, officers and volunteers towards Museum management, Society business and events.

Budgets

The Council budget for the Museum Service 2012-13 has a forecast outturn of £197,000 (net direct total) representing a reduction of approximately 20% since 2009/10.

The Mid Term Financial Strategy requires this to be reduced to £160,000 by 2015/16.

The Museum Society provides funding for purchases to collections and other collections-related projects. During 2011-13 it has funded replacement of display lighting to improve energy-efficiency of displays; the redisplay of the Ancient Egypt gallery; a new Touch Screen Computer with programme for the Natural History Discovery Centre; and a number of purchases for the collection. In 2012-13 it is also making a contribution of £6,000 towards the operating costs of the Museum, but is now unable to continue this contribution after 2012/13 due to the financial pressures of providing funding for Stage I (new store) and Stage 2 (Museum improvements) discussed below.

3.2 A Brief Appraisal of the Museum Service (SWOT)

Strengths

- Collections: variety plus depth - something for everyone, mix of global and local
- Historical attraction and amenity – rare early 19th century museum, Castle ruins on green site

- Well-respected as 'family friendly' museum with learning opportunities, especially through sessions for schools and family activities
- Good community links and volunteers
- Loyal core of visitors and Society members
- Support of Museum Society and District Council, providing a mix of public and charitable funding
- Accredited Status under the government's national accreditation Scheme for public museums and galleries. This confirms that the Museum adheres to a minimum standard in all aspects of its service. It is necessary or desirable for obtaining grant-aid and public confidence. The Museum's Accredited status is due for review in late 2013.

Weaknesses

- Poor, cramped storage, offices and work spaces behind the scenes
- Facilities spread through 3 buildings on site (Museum, Schoolroom, workshop) which can be problematic to staff with a small team
- Shortage of space and opportunity to display permanent collections, especially updating the early history / archaeology and the recent history of north-west Essex
- Lack of modern visitor facilities (shop, refreshments, adequate education and activities space within the Museum building) which in turn restrict opportunities to maximise income, within the limits imposed by staffing levels and deployment of volunteers
- Difficulties of operating in an historic building – energy efficiency, repairs and maintenance, 'fitness for purpose'
- Staff stretched: multiple roles, not enough curatorial posts to cover all collections or to undertake major gallery redisplays while maintaining special exhibitions programme
- No dedicated outreach staff and only a small marketing budget to promote the service
- Learning services reduced from full-time to 2 days per week, which reduced income from taught sessions for schools and souvenir sales
- Site is uphill from the town centre, vehicular access via one-way streets, drive poorly lit after dark and in winter – this does not attract casual footfall

Opportunities

- Scope for reviewing IT and staffing to digitise collections backlog and improve collections management and access for all users, subject to grants and funding
- Update and extend permanent displays and special exhibitions, attracting more visits
- Enhance use of and access to collections through learning opportunities, on-line access and outreach subject to resources
- Improve interpretation and use of the historic site, especially following recent geophysical survey of the Museum and Castle grounds
- Develop community use of site and public areas through small-scale hire
- Income generation can be increased with a larger and better-displayed shop, as long as it can be comfortably staffed by one volunteer

- A larger and better-equipped learning and activity room would enable more income to be raised through school and adult learning and other activities. When not in use by the Museum, it could be hired out for private functions and meetings.
- Need to make Museum building more efficient (energy, use of space, facilities)
- Other Museum buildings (e.g. Curator's house at 40 Castle Street) could generate more income through commercial letting if released from Museum use.
- The whole site will be enhanced by the Council's scheme to improve castle ruins, with potential benefits for both Museum and castle through a co-ordinated approach

Threats

- Current uncertainty over medium-term and long-term funding and staffing levels
- Volunteering opportunities compromised by lack of staff to run and supervise appropriate projects and lack of workspace
- Maintenance of historic Museum building, especially with problems of damp, energy costs and accessibility to some areas

3.3 The Environment in which the Museum Service operates (PESTEL)

Local Documents consulted:

Uttlesford District Council Corporate Plan 2013-18 (Draft)

Uttlesford Economic Development Strategy 2012-14

District Profile: An Economic, Social and Environmental Summary Profile of Uttlesford, January 2013

Saffron Walden Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan 2012

Political

Nationally and regionally, the political environment in which museum services operate is changing. New networks and 'centres of excellence' have yet to become embedded.

- Nationally, public services and the cultural sector are undergoing reorganisation and adjusting to cuts in funding with challenges and opportunities for creative thinking to safeguard and improve services' futures.
- Arts Council England (ACE) vision for museums centres on celebrating excellence, inspiring people, fostering sustainability and resilience with a well-trained workforce.
- Regionally and at county level, museum and heritage bodies are re-organising themselves, e.g. Museums in Essex Committee, and the shape of future cultural networks for museums is gradually being redefined. Former 'hub' museums are being replaced by a smaller number of 'core' services, which in East of England will be Cambridge University Museums and Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service.
- The success of SHARE in the East of England region ('network of know-how' and cooperative training for museums) supports collaboration and workforce development.
- Museums should be well-placed to act as a cohesive social, educational and cultural force; the challenge is to find sufficient resources to realise the potential of their collections in tangible public benefits.

Uttlesford occupies the largest area of any Essex district (63,752 hectares) with a population of about 77,000 – 78,000 [2011 Census figures to be included when available]. The district is expected to build 3,300 new homes over the period 2013-18.

Saffron Walden, the administrative centre, is in the north of the district and relatively distant from communities in the south of Uttlesford. The district is predominantly rural with a landscape recognised as of particular historical and natural interest and character, for example by the recently-formed Hundred Parishes organisation. It also enjoys good north-south road and rail links to London and Cambridge, and the new A120 has enhanced road links to Stansted Airport between Bishop's Stortford and Great Dunmow.

Political Challenges for the Museum Service:

- Nurturing and promoting a 'sense of place' - the natural and human story of Uttlesford – for local residents and for visitors
- Being relevant to local communities, both established and newcomers, by reflecting better the recent history of the district and changes in the 20th century to rural areas
- Preserving and making available the results of archaeological research caused by recent and ongoing development
- Promoting the service and making collections available to a wider audience, including communities in the south of the district and those who currently have little time or inclination to use museums. Conversely, the Museum Service also attracts visitors and users from South Cambridgeshire (where there is no local authority museum provision).
- The name and 'branding' of the Museum could be expanded or changed to reflect the district and wider scope of its collections. Although well established, the name 'Saffron Walden Museum' leads visitors to expect a small museum essentially concerned with the town's local history, and does not help to attract users from the south of Uttlesford.

Economic

Looking at the national picture, local authority expenditure on museum services in 2011-12 decreased by 11% (Local Authority Revenue Expenditure and Financing in England: 2011 to 2012 Final Out-turn, released by the Department for Communities and Local Government, quoted by Museums Association).

Public funding for the Museum Service is under pressure, although the Council's current financial position is secure. The scope and quality of the Museum's collections is a major asset but also represents a challenge for a district local authority of Uttlesford's size to provide sufficient resources to manage and realise the collections' potential. Uttlesford is regarded as a wealthy and desirable district in which to live, although there are issues concerning affordability of housing, some pockets of deprivation and problems for some dispersed rural communities with public transport and access to services. Many middle-income households may be feeling the effects of the recession, and there are many competing priorities for people's money and leisure time.

Business in Uttlesford is characterised by a higher than average knowledge sector, and a relatively high self-employment rate, but a comparatively low local economy size. Airport-related companies look for regional and national marketing rather than local exposure in a small market town, and scientific research sites in north Uttlesford and South Cambridgeshire have a highly specialised niche markets with national and international

markets. There is therefore limited opportunity for business sponsorship or hire of the galleries for corporate functions, and this has been borne out by experience despite efforts to attract such support.

There are interesting challenges for the district posed by its position on the M11 corridor and London-Cambridge railway line, and how 21st century needs for housing and development will be accommodated in a rural area of small historic market towns and dispersed villages. Stansted Airport and the A120 corridor have seen significant development in recent years (transport links, Airport-related industries, housing around Takeley and Dunmow). Such developments also produce much new archaeological information which has caused extensive re-appraisal of local prehistory and early history, with implications for storage capacity and displays in the Museum. Meanwhile, the recently-formed Hundred Parishes organisation seeks to promote the special nature of the landscape and character of Uttlesford and immediately adjacent areas.

Economic Challenges for the Museum Service:

- Stability of core funding from the Council and Society over the period of this forward plan (this will also be crucial in retaining Accredited status and attracting other funding)
- Having a sufficient core of professional / curatorial staff in appropriate subjects to be able to use the collections effectively, to the benefit of the public and sustainability of the service, and to forge and sustain community partnerships
- Heritage Lottery Fund willing to consider proposal for extending and improving Museum
- Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd, through its charitable status and role as owner of the Museum buildings and collections, provides many of the benefits of independent status in raising funds for capital projects and specific appeals through grants, donations and other means (legacies, fund-raising events)
- There is limited scope for business sponsorship, but there may be more scope for attracting private philanthropy, especially through the Museum Society's charitable status
- The visitor economy is important to Uttlesford and rural areas in particular, and supports the economic viability of communities (Uttlesford Economic Development Strategy 2012-14) and a Destination Management Plan has been proposed, to which the Museum could contribute
- Remain flexible and receptive to future local and regional partnership opportunities should appropriate ones emerge

Social

Uttlesford regularly scores highly in surveys (e.g. MORI survey of Essex districts 2012, Halifax survey of 'best places to live', 2013). 92.3% of the district population is white, however, the ethnically diverse proportion of the population is growing - up from 4% in 2001 to over 7% in 2011. Given the wide ranging nature of its collections the Museum would seem well placed in Uttlesford to play a part in celebrating diversity ([Census 2011: Summary of Uttlesford residents by ethnicity grouping](#)). Compared to the national average, the Uttlesford population contains a relatively high proportion of married couples, with or without children. The workforce contains a relatively high proportion of professional,

managerial and technical workers, and workers commuting outside the district. By contrast, the public sector is relatively small.

“The level of local amenities is important for a good quality of life for local residents, making an area an attractive place to live and for tourists to visit.” (District Profile: An Economic, Social and Environmental Summary Profile of Uttlesford, January 2013). Uttlesford scores in the lowest 40% although its rural nature has to be taken into account.

The Council’s Corporate Plan 2013-18 highlights the centrality of localism, and the role of the voluntary sector. The Museum Forward Plan could support this by providing a sense of place through displays and learning services, and encourage greater contribution from volunteers and the local community in those aspects of the Museum service where it is appropriate.

New housing will require new or expanded services including schools. Most of the Museum’s educational work is with primary schools. There are four state secondary schools in the district and there is a potentially good market for adult education and informal learning opportunities, as manifested by the number of local societies, evening classes and thriving local history network.

Social challenges for the Museum Service:

- Develop the Museum and use of its collections to improve the experience of visitors.
- To be seen as relevant to new centres of population (e.g. along Dunmow – Takeley A120) and tell the stories of 20th century history as well as more ancient roots of landscape and communities
- To find resources to extend outreach and marketing into rural communities – ‘taking the service out’
- To attract use by ethnic minority populations on Uttlesford, and encourage all visitors and users to appreciate the diversity of human cultures, locally and worldwide, using local history and world cultures collections
- To find resources to extend formal learning services to schools, including closer working with secondary schools (building on experience and high reputation of service)
- To find resources to provide informal and formal learning opportunities for adults, emphasising ‘hands-on’ learning with the collections as a unique selling-point

Technological

Provision of fast Broadband is high on the agenda for local business. The internet link between the Council Offices and Museum is sometimes prone to slow speeds or disruption for a variety of reasons, and collections management is compromised by lack of a computer link to the off-site store. Documentation would also benefit considerably from a local wi-fi network so that laptops could be used in the various stores and galleries around the Museum building. There is potentially a wide audience for accessing museum collections on-line, both local and – in the case of the world cultures collection – literally worldwide.

Technological challenges for the Museum Service:

- Working with the Council's IT services and broadband providers to improve efficient use of IT in the Museum to manage collections and make them more accessible
- Consider opportunities for the public to access more information in the galleries, as an integral part of future gallery re-displays
- Explore options with the Council to enhance the Museum's website, increasing interaction with users, and smarter use of social media for effective, low-cost marketing and engaging new audiences
- Explore options to enhance interpretation of the castle site and links with other town trails and websites

Environmental

Local people and businesses value Uttlesford's heritage and natural environment, the rural landscape and small town and village life (Uttlesford Economic Development Strategy 2012-14). Conservation of the castle ruins follows recommendations of The Saffron Walden Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan.

There are active networks of local history, natural history and heritage groups and organisations in the district and county. A significant proportion of Museum staff time (mainly the Curator and Natural Science Officer) is spent working with, supporting and fostering relationships with a variety of organisations.

Environmental challenges for the Museum Service:

- As the only cultural and heritage amenity operated by the Council, the Museum should reflect and promote Council values and policy on use of green energy and low carbon footprint, and minimise its energy costs while doing so. This is not straightforward in an historic listed building, but any extension of the present Museum should take the opportunity to refurbish and modernise services and energy use throughout the whole Museum. Prittlewell Priory project at Southend is a recent case in point.
- Balance and align needs of the historic monument and the natural environment on the Museum and Castle site, reflecting both the human history and natural history strands in the Museum's collections
- New store needs to be designed for maximum energy-efficiency
- Maintaining key relationships with other local organisations while staffing is under increased pressure from cuts and managing development projects

Legal

[This section needs discussion with senior Council officers and Museum Society chairman] The Management Agreement between the Council and Museum Society, with associated lease, will need reviewing in the light of changes to storage provision and challenges of financing the service. Improvements to the Museum and site will require special consents from English Heritage. In view of the archaeological features known to exist (Geophysical Survey 2012 by Dr T Dennis) there will be archaeological planning conditions attached to the Museum extension and associated works.

Legal challenges for the Museum Service:

- Clarify and update the management agreement and lease arrangements between the Museum Society and Council (buildings all in Society ownership, including of-site store)
- [Any VAT or Gift Aid issues? – to check with Council and Museum Society]

Appendix 4

4 Consultation and Analysis

A number of external and internal studies of the Museum Service have been carried out in the last ten years.

- 2002 non-visitor report by England Marketing
- 2005 Audience Development research by ABL
- 2007 Museum and Castle public survey
- 2011 Saffron Walden Museum Development Plan public consultation
- Other in-house visitor surveys, and less formal evaluations

Summary of 2005 Audience Development Plan

This research by ABL Cultural Consulting was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, in anticipation of the Heritage Quest Centre project. It made a detailed analysis of actual and potential audiences for the Service.

1) ABL found the main characteristics of the Museum's visitor profile in 2005 were:

- Visitor figures were 20,000 per year (prior to loss of full-time Education Officer post)
- 35.6% of visitors fell into 35-44 age group
- Less than one in eight (12.6%) was under 35
- Family groups were 46.7% of visitors
- School groups were 32% of visitors
- Rural communities were 7.4% of visitors
- Ratio of female : male visitors was roughly 3 : 2
- Most local visitors came from Saffron Walden and accounted for nearly 25% of all visits
- A significant number of visitors (nearly 20%) came from East of England outside Essex or further afield
- There was a significant core of frequent visitors
- ABL also found nearly 50% of those surveyed were making their first visit, showing that the Museum was attracting new audiences, and more than half of these said they were likely to visit again
- Satisfaction levels were very high: 85.2% of visitors were 'very satisfied' and the remainder were 'fairly satisfied'

- Visitors particularly liked the 'family friendly' nature of the Museum, interactive exhibits suitable for children, the respected education programme, and the range and quality of the exhibits

2) Potential Visitors

At the time of this survey in 2005, Uttlesford had just over 70,000 residents distributed over a large rural district. ABL Cultural Consulting conducted 360 street interviews in Great Dunmow, Saffron Walden, Stansted Mountfichet and Thaxted.

- Awareness of the Museum was reasonably high (60%)
- Most (70%) felt that the museum is 'an important asset to the local community'
- Of those questioned 48.3% said they would like to know more about the Museum.
- 46.4% wanted to see more of the Museum's collections made available to the public, and this was noticeably stronger in rural communities
- Many young people (16-29) did not feel that the Museum was aimed at people like them, and there was low awareness of the Museum in this age group (38.8%)
- It was felt that the Museum does not promote itself very widely locally

87.4% of Museum visitors surveyed expressed an interest in seeing reserve collections via special exhibitions, related activities and events, or a separate venue (57.8% were 'very' and 29.6% 'fairly' interested).

The strongest demand for access to collections came from specialist subject groups, local organisations and parishes, with demand for behind-the-scenes access, taking collections 'out and about' and on-line access to collections.

Summary of 2007 Museum and Castle public survey

Local residents, councillors and organisations were invited to give their views regarding improvements to the Museum and Castle site. 24 responses were received.

1) Museum

The most popular ideas for improving the Museum were:

- Extend the Museum building at the east end
- Provide a multi-purpose lecture / meeting room for use by schools, groups and for hire
- More display space for exhibits
- A bigger shop

2) Castle

The most popular suggestions for improvements to the Castle site were:

- Access to the castle ruin
- Stabilisation of the castle ruin
- More interpretation of the castle site
- Lighting of the castle

3) Grounds

The most popular suggestions for improving the grounds were:

- Access from the Common or Castle Hill
- Outdoor displays of objects
- Using the grounds for public events such as concerts / plays
- More seating
- Picnic area
- Café

Results of 2011 Saffron Walden Museum Development Plan public consultation

District residents were invited to complete a questionnaire to give their views on how Saffron Walden Museum and its site could be developed and improved, and the services offered to visitors and local communities in Uttlesford. 161 surveys were completed.

Of those who participated in the consultation:

- 96% had visited Saffron Walden Museum.
- Gender: 53% female, 42% male, 5% no response.
- Ages: 4% 20-34, 7% 35-44, 29% 45-64, 54% 65+, 6% no response.
- Work status: 50% retired, 40% working, 1% unemployed.
- Disability: 11% have a long-term health condition, impairment or disability.
- Ethnic origin: of those who answered this question 83% were White – British

1) Museum Opening

Monday was the least popular weekday for a visit (16% of responses).

At weekends the most popular times to visit were Saturday afternoon and Sunday afternoon (both 30% of responses).

Only 24% of those surveyed were interested in evening opening on one weekday per month.

2) Museum Facilities

Participants were interested in better facilities, listed in order of popularity:

- Larger gallery for special (temporary) exhibitions
- Research area for supervised study of collections, including stored objects by appointment
- New Activity Room for schools, workshops, activities and lectures
- Community display case for local organisations and people to present different topics
- Seating area with hot & cold drinks available
- More extensive Museum Shop
- More / better WCs

3) Learning Services

People thought these learning services should be offered, listed in order of popularity:

- Talks and workshops for adults
- Talks and workshops for families
- Exhibits and workshops to support local community projects
- Evening classes for adults
- Expanded schools loan box service

4) Access to More Collections

People wanted to see more of these exhibits and information, in order of popularity:

- Local history photographs, prints and maps
- Local and social history objects
- Archaeology (local)
- Temporary exhibitions
- Costume and textiles
- More information on the collection on touch screens in the Museum galleries
- Natural History
- Search and browse collections on-line at home
- Ceramics and glass
- Agricultural tools and horse-drawn vehicles
- Rocks, minerals and fossils
- Guided tours on audio guide
- World cultures (as in 'World of Man gallery')

5) Castle and Grounds

Participants agreed the site could be improved in the following ways, in order of popularity:

- Information boards on history of Castle and site
- Use of Castle and grounds for outdoor performances and events
- Project to investigate town and castle history, with opportunity for community involvement
- Access to Castle ruins
- Picnic seating in grounds
- Improved on-site visitor parking & turning circle
- Facility for parking bicycles
- Improved lighting of drive & Museum after dark
- Improved pedestrian access along drive
- Improved pedestrian access from Church Street

Informal feedback

The previous Education Officer undertook a consultation exercise with some local schools in 2007. It was found that:

- Primary schools like imaginative sessions devised with lots of artefacts and specimens for children to handle and explore. Things to handle are more important than looking at objects in cases.
- Often teachers do not know much themselves about some topics and do not have time to do research
- Support materials for follow-up work in the classroom would be welcome
- There are a number of schools in the district which do not or cannot visit the Museum – there is scope to extend the range of loan boxes
- Secondary schools say they do not have time to take students on visits anywhere - but this may change with government policy making it obligatory for these students to study original material

Current Visitor Figures 2006-2012

Figures for Museum **visitors** and **users** have been taken from the quarterly and annual reports for the Museum Service since 2006. Visitors are all those visiting the Museum in person, including activities and events in the grounds. Users are all those using the Museum Service, including those on-site (visitors, as above); those off-site (attending a talk, display or other off-site activity by Museum staff) and those using the Museum 'remotely' (information, research enquiries and services by phone, fax, email, letter and website visits or 'Pageviews').

Year	Visitors			All Users	Notes
	Public	Schools	Total Visitors		
2006	15991	5979	21970	26736	Fund-raising for HQC
2007	15107	5459	20566	32413	Sealed Knot event in May
2008	13943	3553	17496	26964	Retirement of f/t Education Officer, break before post is filled
2009	13744	2472	16216	23759	Education Officer left in August, post frozen
2010	15172	1926	17098	25108	Museum's 175 th anniversary event attracted crowds. Learning Officer appointed in Sept for 2 days per week
2011	13634	2184	15818	24590	
2012	13253	2494	15747	26751	Sparks Will Fly event in May. Amalgamation of Visitor and Learning Services into one post

The table indicates while total users of the service (including website users) fluctuates around the 23,000 – 26,000, total visitor numbers have declined from around 20,000 – 21,000 per year to 15,000-16,000. This is partly due to the drop in school visits, from around 5,000 to 6,000 per year to between 2,000 and 2,500 since the reduction of the education officer post from full-time to 2 days per week. Other contributory factors have been a reduction in class sizes in some schools and a decrease in large groups travelling by coach, on account of increasing travel costs for school trips. Regular evaluation of school visits and holiday activities shows that this service is highly regarded with consistently excellent and very good rates of customer satisfaction. A small team of casual assistants and volunteers assist in delivery of activities and learning, but lack of staff-time and space prevent further expansion of school services and activities.

Some fluctuation in visitor numbers can be linked to specific special events; from 2001 to 2005, the average visitor numbers were steady at just over 14,000 per year, but intensive fund-raising and publicity for the Heritage Quest Centre in 2006 and the Sealed Knot 'Civil War' weekend in 2007 boosted visits to over 15,000. This pattern was repeated with the 175th special events in 2010, but not with Sparks Will Fly in 2012, when high attendance for this event was partly offset by lower July-August visitor figures. So the underlying trend has been a fall in visitor numbers by about 1,000 compared to pre-2006 levels, from 14,000-15,000 to 13,000-14,000.

The programme of special exhibitions (a mix of touring exhibitions and elements generated from the Museum's own collections) and related events is the other main draw for visitors, both repeat visits from local residents and new visitors or tourists. The Museum and its collections appeal to a wide range of interests, and the Museum needs to offer a varied programme, so not every exhibition will be a 'family blockbuster' designed to bring in large numbers of family groups with young children. A balance between maintaining visitor numbers and appealing to a variety of audiences has to be struck. The special exhibitions gallery is relatively small, which places some restrictions on the type of exhibitions, interactives and exhibits, and cannot be closed off during exhibition changes because it is the route to other galleries and fire escapes. The need for a larger gallery to improve the presentation of special exhibitions is supported by the responses to the 2011 Public Consultation.

Another important issue is the difficulty of making substantial changes to the permanent galleries. Some of these are showing their age and it has not been possible for staff to keep up with revision and new additions to existing displays alongside the conflicting demands of collections management, public enquiries and activities, special exhibitions and fund-raising. This is an issue of staff capacity, and especially for the large local history and archaeology collections which scored most highly in recent public consultations. These are also the galleries most in need of re-display: the archaeology gallery will benefit from the deposition of recent excavation archives once the new store is completed and a more creative display of objects in themes and local stories. The local history gallery has insufficient space to show a wide range of collections, for example agricultural tools and equipment, or to update the story of the district and social changes from World War II onwards. Re-display of these core local collections could help to bring visitors in, especially from rural parts of the district if a greater range of local history could be accommodated. Some collections, notably local history photographs, are best displayed on touchscreen computers for visitors to browse. The popularity of the touchscreen computer in the Natural History Discovery Centre indicates the scope for extending the use of touchscreens into other areas.

Finally, there is no display space to regularly show recent acquisitions or invite local people to exhibit their collections, for example local metal-detectorists or organisations celebrating a special anniversary with a small display. Offering such opportunities and involving local people more directly the Museum might help to extend the range of local visitors and the feeling that the Museum reflects their community.

According to the 2005 Audience Development Study by ABL, some felt that the Museum could market itself more widely. With an annual advertising budget of £1,800 and the Visitor Services post now combined with Learning, marketing and publicity has to focus on basics. Smarter use of digital technology, including social media and 'apps', could extend the range of low-cost promotional tools, especially for younger and family audiences, and the Museum has already taken steps in this direction with Facebook and Twitter. Some people however, especially among older age groups who form a significant proportion of core visitors, may be reached more effectively by printed media and traditional forms of advertising. Feedback from evaluation of activities shows that some families look first and foremost to adverts in the local free press for 'things to do'. A major refurbishment of the galleries and extension of the Museum would offer opportunity for a re-launch and publicity drive, which should aim to capture email addresses of new visitors for the regular e-mailing list which the Museum has developed.