

MUSEUM MANAGEMENT WORKING GROUP held at the Museum Great Hall on WEDNESDAY, 15 NOVEMBER 2023 at 6.00 pm

Present: Councillor A Reeve (Chair)
Councillors J Davey, J Moran and G Sell.

Museum Society: K Eden, D Kent and T Watson.

Officers in attendance: R Auty (Director of Corporate Services), C Edwards (Democratic Services Officer), J Oxley (Interim Curator) and A Webb (Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services).

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received from Councillor Sutton, Richard Priestley and Christine Sharpe from the Museum Society.

Councillor Moran declared that he was a trustee of the Ashdon Windmill Trust.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 20th September 2023 were approved as an accurate record.

The Chair of the Museum Society said that further to his report at the last meeting, minute 3, it had since been decided that rather than a pause, the survey would not go ahead. He said that there was currently not enough clarity on the future development plans.

The Interim Curator said that in the Museum Curator's report at the last meeting it stated in minute 4, that recruitment of Volunteers was difficult, she wanted to clarify that there were lots of people coming forward to volunteer but it was the administration of organising training and supervision that was proving more difficult.

3 MUSEUM SOCIETY CHAIR'S REPORT

The Museum Society Chair said that there was not much to report since the last meeting but they were discussing how to move forward with the development plan in the absence of Carolyn Wingfield who was the driving force behind the previous plans. He said that they were also taking into account Jenny Oxley's workload when considering how to move forward.

Tony Watson said that they hoped that Carolyn Wingfield would become a Museum Society member.

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MUSEUM CURATOR'S REPORT

The quarterly report from July-September 2023 was completed before Carolyn Wingfield left as Curator. The Interim Curator highlighted the key points and gave an update on the situation since the end of September, the full report has been appended to the minutes. The following was highlighted:-

- User statistics were up 24% this quarter. They had a busy summer programme including the Lion Trail and Art Exhibition.
- They were pursuing larger school groups of between 60 to 120 children to drive income and be more commercial.
- The interim forward plan set out a vision for the Museum to be fit for the future. There needed to be a culture shift and the Museum needed to be more digital and commercial as well as working on improving communication amongst the staff and volunteers.
- There needed to be a rationalisation of all the hard copy paperwork and books to streamline the Museum and make it easier to work in.
- One of the boilers was up and running, so the museum has working heating, but it was only operating at 20% capacity and the second boiler was not up and running yet. The capital project was not yet complete.
- There were a number of ongoing IT issues which included problems with the high data security levels required at Uttlesford District Council (UDC), which was made more complicated due to the number of casual staff and volunteers at the Museum.
- The Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services said that there was strict government protocol that needed to be followed but hoped that a number of these problems would be resolved in the review, he added that it was a unique service in a very old building.
- A new exhibition opened on Friday for a private view which was attended by 123 people.
- October half term had been successful with a bat making craft activity and popular spooky trail evening for families.
- Work was taking place to build a new marketing strategy including the use of a digital display screen in the Market Square to display the exhibition posters and looking at signage throughout the Museum. The aim was to diversify the audience and raise the museum's profile.
- Work on collections had been more difficult due to operational priorities as Jenny Oxley was doing both key roles, however loans were still on going and the Museum continued to receive research enquiries and loan requests as the collection was very extensive.
- There were several collection audits taking place, including firearms and world culture collections.
- There was a need to rationalise the Museum's collection but in order to do this there would need to be more collection staff.
- The archaeology depositions brought in income as the Museum charged a box fee, it had been agreed that this money would go direct to the Museum Society going forward.

- There had been a new handset for contactless payments due to a change in company, this had caused extra work.
- The Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS) had recently scored the Museum at 80% which was an improvement from the last 77% score. They had suggested a number of improvements including better commercial photographs, marketing and general aesthetics, all known issues which were in hand. They praised the new website for its layout and its improved SEO.
- An accessibility guide was being produced.

In response to Members questions the following comments were made by Officers:-

- Due to the Blueprint Uttlesford programme Jenny Oxley had been taken on as the Interim Curator and continued in her job as the Collections Officer for Human History until 31st March 2025. All options for the future of the Museum were being explored within the review. Additional support would be brought in to help the Interim Curator in the short term.
- Some money had already been spent on the Development Project in the form of a grant (Resilient Heritage) and in-kind contribution from Uttlesford District Council in the form of Officer's time. This had produced a lot of useful consultant's reports including the Audience Development Plan and Fundraising advice, that was informing the museum's current and future development.
- The outcome of the review would become clear by the autumn of 2024, the Museum Society was already involved and the role of Members would be in reviewing and making decisions on the way forward.

There were ongoing discussions about hiring out the Schoolroom but there needed to be some building fabric works carried out first. The main downside was the lack of car parking and this would need to be addressed if the income was to be maximised.

The Castle was still closed due to the recent repairs that were carried out on the advice of Historic England. Unfortunately, the mortar had failed due to an exceptionally hot summer and a number of flints were falling every day. There was no current solution and so the Castle remained closed.

Councillor Sell left the meeting at 7:15pm

5 MUSEUM ACCREDITATION

The Curator said that nationally the Arts Council had been postponing submission deadlines due to Covid and a lack of assessors. It had originally been due in 2020, and many of the policies and procedures had been updated and officially approved.

The deadline date for submission was now 12th January 2024. This consisted of an online submission including all the updated policies and procedures as well as minuted Council approvals. The advice was to put in an interim plan due to

the review and current uncertainty around the future of the Museum. This would be most likely to result in the Museum being given provisional status. This should not affect the Museum's ability to apply for funding.

The Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services said that the interim plan would go to Cabinet on 14th December 2023 for approval.

Tony Watson said that the Museum Society cannot raise income only capital.

There was discussion about the hiring out of the Museum for weddings and other events but due to a number of issues including the current closure of the Castle this was not currently possible.

It was unanimously agreed that the report should go forward to Cabinet.

Resolved: That the Interim Plan would go forward to Cabinet for approval on the 14th December 2023.

6 **DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING**

To be arranged for February 2024.

The meeting ended at 7:26pm