

Draft Minutes of the County Hall Museum Management Committee held on Thursday 6th September 2012 at 7pm in the Committee Room, Old Abbey House, Abingdon-on-Thames.

Present

Cllr Julie Mayhew-Archer
Cllr Jason Fiddaman
Cllr Patrick Lonergan
Cllr Hermann Matheson
Cllr Helen Pighills
Cllr Andrew Todd
Mr. Peter Clare

Chairman
Vice Chairman

Abingdon Museum Friends (co-opted)

In Attendance

Mr Nigel Warner
Mrs Jane Bowen

Town Clerk (Clerk to the meeting)
Curator

C15 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Aidan Melville; Cllr Monica Lovatt (Mayor of Abingdon-on-Thames); and Cllr Sandy Lovatt (Chairman of Finance and General Purposes Committee / Leader).

C16 **Declarations of Interest**

The Town Clerk confirmed that the advice from the District Council Monitoring Officer is that membership of other local authorities is not deemed to be a declarable pecuniary interest.

There were no declarations of interest

C17 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the County Hall Museum Management Committee held on 22nd May 2012 be approved as a correct record.

C18 **Financial Report**

The Committee received and considered the financial year report for the year to date, as circulated with the agenda.

The Town Clerk answered a number of questions from Members. He stated that it was intended to make an appeal against the 2010 rating valuation on the County Hall; he hoped that following the completion of the work on the building it would now be possible to do this. It was noted that the Council had until 2015 to lodge this appeal. A Member queried that the revenue account showed no spending on IT equipment. The Town Clerk stated that the new equipment in the Museum had been purchased through the Heritage Lottery Fund budget. In relation to bank charges, the Town Clerk stated that these related to charges for the credit card machine.

Resolved: that the report be adopted.

C19 Council Forward Plan 2012/15

Members received and considered the draft sections of the Council's Forward Plan which related to the Museum services, which were contained in the report from the Curator.

In response to a question from a Member, the Curator stated that public satisfaction would be measured through surveys of visitors. In relation to the Museum's partnerships, Members requested that the Museum's work with the Oxfordshire Joint Working Group, the Abingdon Area Archaeological Society and the Abingdon Museum Friends be included.

It was **resolved** that, subject to the above additions, the suggested wording for the Museum services in the Council Forward Plan be approved for inclusion in the Plan to be considered by the Town Council.

The Committee noted that the Museum's related Forward Plan would require drafting over the coming months and it was **resolved** that the Curator work with Cllr Julie Mayhew-Archer, as Chairman of the Committee, Cllr Jason Fiddaman, as Vice-Chairman of the Committee and the Curator to draft this plan.

C20 Curatorial Report

The Committee received and considered the report of the Curator in relation to the above.

The Curator reported that since the Museum re-opened on 7th July 2012 over 9,000 visitors had come to the Museum. Income had amounted to between £500 and £600 per week with the majority of that coming from roof visits and miscellaneous donations. It was noted that shop goods were selling steadily but slowly. In response to a question from a Member, the Curator stated that the Museum had spoken with a retail consultant before re-opening and had been advised to stock a relatively small amount of town related items. Most of the lines which were stocked were selling and there was a desire to expand the range.

In relation to visitor feedback, there had been a number of negative comments regarding the lack of a lift to the Museum galleries. The Committee noted that the Council had made all reasonable efforts to allow disabled access to upper floors. The Town Clerk stated that it was worthwhile reminding the Committee as to why there was no lift to the Sessions Hall.

Plans for an external tower lift to the Sessions Hall had received Heritage Lottery Funding and had emerged following exhaustive work with the English Heritage (EH) South East Regional Office, who supported the scheme. However following the submission of the planning application in the spring of 2009, and the referral of the application to the English Heritage Advisory Committee (EHAC), English Heritage had a complete change of heart and unexpectedly objected to the lift. The Town Clerk stated that there was no mechanism for appeal against EHAC's decision. If the Town Council had pursued its planning application with the lift in place and the District Council had then given permission, the application would have automatically been called in by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State's Principal Advisor in relation to listed buildings was English Heritage. In the then unlikely event that the planning permission had not been overturned, English Heritage would in any case have had the final say because of their property interest as a guardian of the property.

The Town Council's room for manoeuvre had also further been inhibited because the schemes being operated by the Heritage Lottery Fund were at that point just about to change and had there been a delay by the Town Council in proceeding to the next stage of the application, then it was possible that funding would have been lost or the percentage of the project which had been funded by English Heritage would have been seriously diminished, meaning that the Council could not have afforded the work.

Other types of lift to the Sessions Hall were explored with English Heritage but none of them found favour, although EH did allow the platform lift to the basement.

Members requested that the Town Clerk prepare a statement in relation to the efforts which the Council had made to provide a lift to the upper floors which could then be issued to any interested parties. Members also requested that the negative comments in the visitors' book should be periodically collated and sent to English Heritage, and that any complainants in relation to access should also be encouraged to contact English Heritage.

The Curator then moved on to buildings maintenance issues. It was noted that progress had been made with English Heritage having recommenced some of their maintenance obligations. The Chairman, Cllr Julie Mayhew-Archer, explained that English Heritage was a complex organisation which was not always easy to deal with but that under the guardianship agreement they had ongoing maintenance responsibilities and the improvements made at the County Hall would make these less onerous. However it was important, despite the budget difficulties which were faced by English Heritage, that they fulfilled their responsibilities and agreed a plan for ongoing maintenance.

In regard to the main contract snagging, the Curator drew attention to the problems with the platform lift, which had been out of action. After numerous visits from the lift engineers, it had been established that the problem related to the limiter switches on the lift of which two were working but the third had been working intermittently. In response to a question from a Member, the Curator stated that vandalism and the potential for litter to be thrown into the lift had not been a problem.

The Committee noted that the Museum was due to re-apply for its National Museum Accreditation in November 2012 and had to submit all the relevant documents by 29th April 2013. It was noted that the Curator would bring a draft forward the plan to the November Committee meeting with a view to approving the plan and other related documents at the February 2013 meeting.

Members noted the report in relation to staffing and volunteers. The Curator stated that the new Museum had had a very good start and she stated that she had an excellent team in place. She thanked them for all their hard work.

Finally Members considered the future exhibition plan and felt that this represented a good programme through to the end of 2014.

A Member asked what publicity was undertaken in relation to temporary exhibitions. The Curator stated that the Museum publicised exhibitions through leaflets and in local publications such as "Round and About". She stated that there was an article in September's "Limited Edition" which was sent with the Oxford Times. The Museum attempted to take advantage of all free listings. Members suggested utilisation of parish newsletters, the website and the Facebook page. In response to a question from Member, the Curator stated that the different museums in the county stock one another's leaflets. The Chairman, Cllr Julie Mayhew-Archer, stated that the

Oxfordshire Museums Council produced a leaflet publicising the different museums in the county and encouraged Members to lobby the District Council to ensure that this continues to be funded.

It was **resolved** that: the report of the Curator be approved, together with the recommendations, including the programme for future temporary exhibitions to December 2014.

C21 **Education and Learning**

Members received and considered the report of the Audience Development Officer in relation to the above, as circulated with the agenda.

Members noted the range of work which had been undertaken in relation to the gallery and exhibition interpretation and displays; and the key audience groups. The marketing work had been important and Members noted that the Officer would be building on the work that had already been undertaken.

Resolved: that the report of the Audience Development be approved.

C22 **Abingdon County Hall Museum Collections**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Collections Officer as circulated with the agenda.

The Committee noted the work that had been undertaken leading up to the re-opening of the Museum and the important work which was now taking place in relation to the collections. Members considered that this work was valuable in ensuring the Council's collections were being conserved for future generations.

Resolved: that the report of the Collections Officer be approved.

The Chairman, Cllr Julie Mayhew-Archer, then took the opportunity to ask all Members if they had any particular questions, feedback or issues relating either to the reports given to the meeting, or to any other aspect of the work of the Museum.

The Chairman stated that she was concerned that it was not possible to access the basement directly from the Museum itself but it was necessary to enter the basement through the separate door at the back of the building. She felt that this inhibited the building operating as a functional whole. She was also concerned that the internal signage pointed people to the basement via the steps from the Museum. The Curator stated that the access to the basement was at the recommendation of the Council's surveyors principally because the basement and the main building formed two separate fire compartments. Members considered this matter and a number of Members expressed the view that in any case the stone steps from the main Museum entrance to the basement were unsuitable for use by the general public. However, the Curator suggested that it may be helpful to procure a small A-sign inside the entrance to the Museum and at the door to the basement to make people aware that the basement itself should be accessed via the rear of the building.

Members expressed satisfaction that the roof had been open on weekdays during the summer. This had brought more people into the Museum and had been much appreciated by visitors. The Curator stated that the roof opening had been undertaken by volunteers and thanked the Museum Friends for their efforts in this regard.

A Member stated that he had received comments that there would be interest in hiring out the various spaces in the Museum during the evenings, and asked the Committee what its view was in relation to this matter. Another Member stated that it was Council policy to promote the use of the rooms in the Guildhall and therefore if spaces were hired in the Museum this would potentially undermine the viability of another Council facility. The Town Clerk stated that there would be financial implications in making rooms available for hire and he felt that this was something which should be looked at in more detail when matters had settled down, perhaps in the spring.

A Member raised the issue of the dolls' house and felt it required more information to explain its history and also a light to illuminate the different parts. The Curator responded that lighting the dolls' house would be difficult because it could damage the exhibit and that at present there was a torch which could be used to look into it.

C23 Abingdon Museum Friends

Mr. Peter Clare, the co-opted representative of Abingdon Museum Friends, reported that he had recently transferred all the sums which had been raised by the Friends in relation to grants from trusts and charitable organisations and from commercial firms over to the Museum Project.

The Friends were now recommencing their monthly talks at St Helen's Church following the summer break, with the first one taking place that evening. They were normally scheduled for the first Thursday of the month.

A Member reminded the Committee that the Council was developing a new portal / website and suggested that the Friends may wish to have a link to this. It was suggested that Mr. Clare contact the Deputy Town Clerk in this regard.

The Chairman of the Committee, Cllr Julie Mayhew-Archer, requested that it be checked that the email newsletter of the Friends is circulated to all councillors.

She thanked the Friends for their continued support of the Museum and in particular for their strenuous efforts over the past few years which had resulted in significant sums being raised for the Improvement and Access Project.

C24 Dates of meetings for 2012/13

The Committee noted that the calendar of meetings included the following dates for meetings of the Committee:

Tuesday 6th November
Thursday 3rd January 2013
Tuesday 26th February.

C26 Exclusion of the Press and the Public

The Chairman moved and it was **resolved that**:

"In accordance with section 1 (2) of the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960 (as extended by Section 100 of the Local Government Act 1972), the public (including the press) be excluded from the meeting because of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted."

See also confidential appendix to the minutes for detail of confidential items relating to the matters detailed below.

C27 **Confidential appendix to minutes of 24th April 2012**

Resolved: that the confidential appendix to the minutes of the meeting of 22nd May 2012 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

C28 **Staffing**

The Committee received and considered the joint report of the Town Clerk and the Curator in relation to the above. Following discussion of the report and the highlighting of a number of matters, it was **resolved:** that the report be approved.

C29 **County Hall Museum Improvement and Access Project**

The Committee received and considered the report of the Town Clerk in relation to the above.

The Committee noted that whilst the project went through until September 2013, the major objectives of the project had been completed. The building work had been completed and snagging would be ongoing for the coming months. The final account had been agreed and had been approved by the Heritage Lottery Fund. In relation to the fit-out contract there were a number of items which were considered and which Members gave approval to from the remaining funds.

It was proposed by Cllr Patrick Lonergan and seconded by Cllr Jason Fiddaman **resolved:** that the Committee approve the report and the financial update as at 3rd September 2012, endorse the action of the Town Clerk in utilising the project contingency to fund Museum fit out items and confirm the delegation to the Town Clerk to manage the financial aspects of the project provided that this was within the overall budget of £3,045,806 as set by the Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund for this work.

The meeting rose at 9.10pm