

Abingdon County Hall Museum

Forward Plan for period 2022 – 2026

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The plan has been approved by the Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council County Hall Museum Management Committee on 1st March 2022.

This plan will be reviewed in November 2025

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1 Introduction

This plan covers a period of four years, from April 2022 to March 2026, with some ideas for longer term aims. Following the changes to the original staffing structure of March 2017 there was a Head of Service, three management staff, six front of house, and twenty volunteers. Following the departure of one of the management staff, the museum had been managed as a temporary measure by the Head of Service and the remaining two management staff, with some responsibilities devolving upon front of house staff. From November 2020 a new staffing structure has been in place, doing away with the post of 'Head of Museum Service' to be replaced by the Museum Manager position. The Museum Manager model supersedes a curator role for the organisation such that the Museum Manager oversees everything that happens within the institution, manages the staff, and ensures policies, budgets and goals are made and kept. They also have the final say on the exhibits and displays. The Museum Manager reports to the Town Clerk directly.

The Museum is a Local Authority museum, owned and operated by Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council; a third-tier governance authority. The museum service and the running costs of the Grade I listed County Hall are borne by the Town Council, with repairs affecting the historic fabric being the responsibility of English Heritage who are custodians of the building.

The duration of the plan is based upon the two previous plans, 2014-2017 and 2017-2021, which can be classified as mid-length operational plans. This plan also falls within the period of Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council's strategy document 2019-2023. This plan therefore aims to place the Museum within the wider framework of the Town Council's strategy and considers the role it plays in delivering the Town Council's aims. It also considers the individual aims of the service, growing the Museum's audience base by engaging with hitherto under-represented groups and positioning the Museum more centrally in local public life.

2 Statement of Purpose

Abingdon County Hall Museum aims to be an outstanding town museum. It is owned and operated by Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council, and its mission is to present and interpret the history of Abingdon to the widest possible audience by:

- Displaying and interpreting collections and information in an accessible and inclusive way and making information available to researchers and virtual visitors
- Promoting and delivering life-long learning, family activities, formal education and outreach linked to the collections, exhibitions and locality
- Documenting and conserving its collections, according to best practice guidelines
- Continuing to collect relevant artefacts and images linked to the history of the town of Abingdon-on-Thames, in accordance with the stated Collections Development Policy
- Caring for and maintaining Abingdon County Hall, a Grade I listed building which is in the guardianship of English Heritage.

The County Hall is located in a prominent place in the Market Place and is at the centre of many town events, activities and traditions. The Museum aims to take a full part in community life by hosting events and being part of the welcome to the town for tourists and a focal point for local residents by ensuring that:

- The Museum makes the Kempster Room, Arcade and surrounding outdoor space available to local groups and creates a strong bond with the community.
- The Museum continues to offer excellent customer care by creating an environment where all visitors are valued and by ensuring that staff and volunteers are appropriately trained.
- Museum staff co-ordinate with Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council, colleagues in other departments and local organisations to ensure integrated provision of excellent events and activities.

3 Review of previous plan (2017-2021)

There are contiguous aspects to the previous plan linked with care for the County Hall historic building, improving visitor experiences and improving where possible visitor numbers, reviews and integration with the community. These aspects will continue to be a target of the museum service and must be viewed as a process of continual development.

Following a review of visitor suggestions, comments and general feedback from both visitors and staff/volunteers, it became apparent that the Museum was 'inaccessible' both visually (no clear defining element to reveal that the building is a museum) and physically (no lift), with a surprising number of comments from local people claiming to have not known that the Museum exists within the County Hall. This led to an in-house development of improved signage, an increased retail offer, a new café, increased use of the roof terrace and upgrading signage both within the Museum and externally.

The plans for utilising space in the re-developed Guildhall as a storage facility for the Museum did not come to fruition. There are currently no suitable facilities in Abingdon and the immediate area for long-term storage of the collection. It remains a long-term aim to find a suitable space in or in the vicinity of Abingdon, either through further development of the Guildhall or independently.

Considering the aims devised alongside user groups and stakeholders, the Museum has increased its social media presence (2000 followers on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram). It has continued to publicise exhibitions and events on the Town Council's website abingdon.gov.uk. The Museum has further increased its online engagement by adding a YouTube channel, a blog and a craft activities Facebook page. The Museum has run a number of events, within and outside of opening hours, and in conjunction with local interest groups:

- Historical talks by both local experts and experts from further afield
- Running Museums at Night 2017, 2018, 2019
- Events and activities linked to the ATOM Festival
- Events linked to the Festival of Archaeology
- Running the Bob Frampton Prize competition
- Social media project Women of Abingdon
- Digital projects such as Abingdon People in Lockdown

The Museum has increased regular bookings for education sessions from several local schools. The sessions are led by two regular freelance Museum Educators who deliver the Museum's workshops and voluntarily perform ambassadorial work at local schools to gauge more clearly individual curricular requirements and adapting workshops accordingly. The Museum Educators have also developed a virtual workshop programme, which has rolled out to local schools, with the

possibility of widening their scope to much further afield. The Senior Museum Assistants keep regular contact with the schools and publicise the service.

The Museum has continued to produce its own exhibition, event and activity brochures, posters and flyers and to maintain an online presence. In addition, it has used paid advertising in local magazines to target specific audiences for particular exhibitions.

Following a Council-wide staffing review, a new staffing structure was implemented at the Museum. The management team is headed by the Museum Manager and includes a Collections Officer, two Senior Museum Assistants with responsibilities for the education programme, admin tasks and the Museum's social media presence, and several Museum Assistants on the front of house team. The Museum continues to work closely with senior officers at Roysse Court, with the Museum Manager reporting to the Town Clerk.

On 23rd March 2020 the UK went into a lockdown in response to the global pandemic of Covid 19. The restrictions caused closure of museums and galleries and generated new ways of connecting with audiences through social media and digitally produced events. Abingdon Museum embraced the opportunity to develop a digital platform to engage virtually with audiences and strengthen social media output.

4 Development of the 2022-2026 Plan

This plan was compiled by Abingdon County Hall Museum management team following public consultation by way of surveys, suggestions, visitor book comments, direct communication and feedback. In developing the key aims of the Museum and discussing wider SWOT/PESTLE factors consultation with the Friends of Abingdon Museum, Town Councillors and other key stakeholders was conducted. The Forward Plan was approved by Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council.

Public feedback indicated that continuing to focus on Abingdon's heritage remained of high interest to visitors, with themes around Abingdon's industry, such as the MG factory and Morland's brewery especially popular and relevant to local people. Access remains a concern to the public and visitor comments often refer to the lack of a lift to the Museum's main galleries as a detractor from the overall experience. These comments have been invaluable in helping shape the focus of the forward plan to 2026.

The Friends of the Museum have provided excellent external insight into how the Museum is perceived by local patrons and visitors, and their comments on the opportunities potentially available to the Museum, and their support of widening access serve as an indicator to the Museum that this is an important point for the wider public. This is reflected in the Museum's analysis of its current position and its Key Aims.

Council members and key stakeholders provided valuable opinions on the long-term financial planning of the Museum and how this may be shaped by developments between 2022-2026. With local government restructuring a potentially disruptive factor within the Forward Plan period, the Museum must continue to improve its self-sustainability and prepare for potential threats from politico-economic changes.

5 Administration of the Forward Plan

Managing a programme of exhibitions, events, activities and general administration to achieve the Key Aims and Vision of the Forward Plan will be undertaken by the Museum Manager and the Collections Officer.

The County Hall Museum Management Committee was superseded by the Community Services Advisory Committee in July 2021. Officers will report to Abingdon-on-Thames Community Services Advisory Committee on a quarterly basis and will provide reports on each area of museum management at each meeting. Where possible, discussions pertaining to the progress of particular aspects of the Forward Plan will be included in these quarterly meetings.

The Community Services Advisory Committee may approve or amend suggestions made by the Museum Officers where both internal and external factors may influence the progress of the plan. This could be in relation to improving income, visitor attendance, increasing or decreasing events and exhibitions, staffing, opening hours, among others.

Management and timing of Key Aims is detailed in a Supplementary Action Plan and will be monitored at the end of each financial year. A full review of the plan will be conducted in November 2025, with any actions to be taken accordingly. This is in preparation for the implementation of the next Forward Plan.

6 Current Position

a. Organisation and structure

The County Hall Museum is owned and operated by Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council. Decisions, plans and policies concerning the County Hall Museum are delegated to a selected committee of the council. Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council operates a strict governance and management policy, Health and Safety policy, employment policies in line with local government policies. Abingdon County Hall Museum is subject to the same policies as any department of the Council.

The Museum is housed in an arcaded free-standing classical revival County Hall which is Grade I listed and under the guardianship of English Heritage. The organisation provides expertise and maintenance support for a number of structural and facility aspects of the building, whilst Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council funds and operates the staffing, daily maintenance, collections and exhibits, and all associated museum service operations.

b. Public opening

The Museum is open Tuesday-Sunday 10am-4pm and Bank Holidays. It is closed between 24 December – 2 January.

The entirety of the Museum is open to public except for an office located on the Museum's third floor, and storage/facility spaces/cupboards throughout the building. The Museum has two special (temporary) exhibition spaces, one of which currently houses the Town Council's silver collection on permanent display until further notice.

The Museum has a community / education room, and lift to the basement. The Museum's roof terrace is only open to the public during periods of clement weather and is charged at £2 per adult, £1 child, £1 English Heritage Member. The English Heritage member discount is offered by the Museum as a gesture of goodwill towards the continued working relationship between Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council and English Heritage.

As a result of a continuing series of exhibitions (4-6 annually) the Museum runs a number of private views, as well as opening for special events, school visits, civic groups and private tours. During any periods of public access to the building there is a key holder duty manager present. The Museum is operated over four storeys, and each floor open to the public is supervised by a designated Museum Assistant/Volunteer to ensure the safety of the public and collections.

c. Staffing

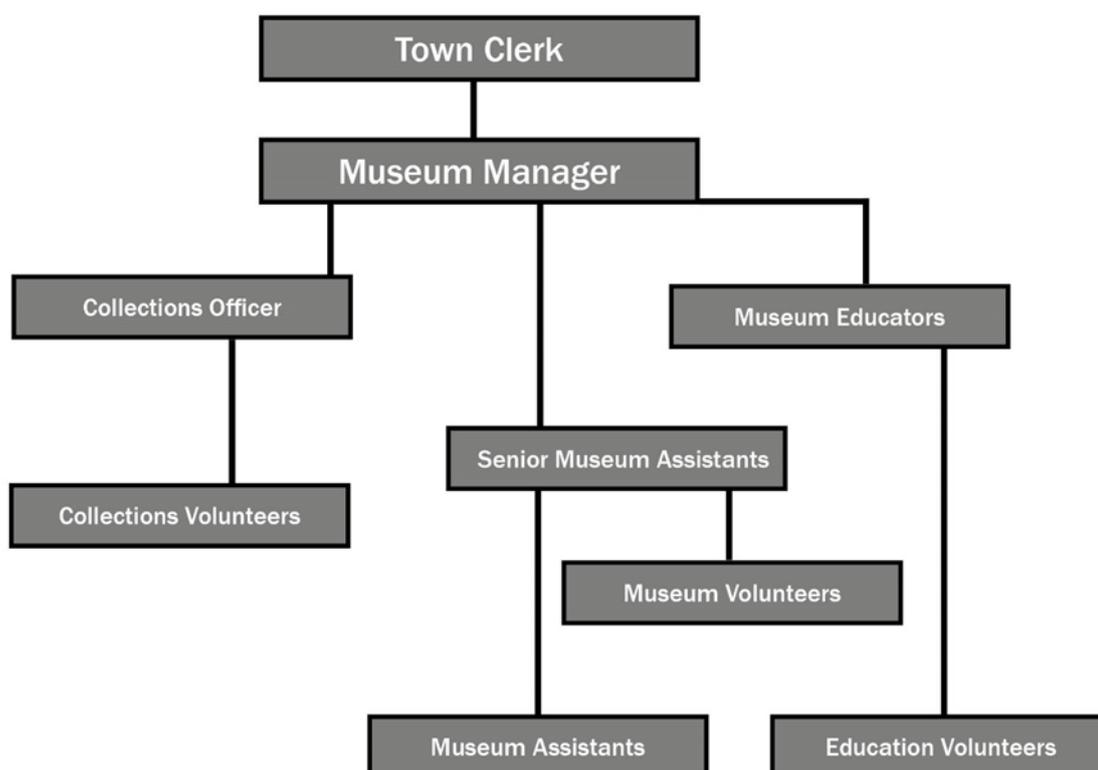
The Museum is staffed during all open hours. The Museum has been operating under a new management structure since November 2020.

The Museum Manager (30.0 hours) is the senior figure responsible for the museum service and its operations, ensuring that policies and procedures are adhered to. The Museum Manager takes overall responsibility for budget setting and control, the planning of exhibitions, events, maintenance of the building, research, publications, marketing, communications and administration.

The Collections Officer (36.5 hours) takes overall responsibility for collections care, collections records, loans and gifts, and assisting the Museum Manager in matters of exhibition design, research and programming.

The Senior Museum Assistants (25 hours) assist the Museum Manager on some administrative tasks as required and act as keyholder/duty manager when required. They take responsibility for the shop and stock taking, weekly banking, some data gathering and the Museum's social media.

Museum Assistants (40 hours combined) are the public face of the Museum, greeting visitors, answering queries, ensuring exhibition cases, floors and public areas are clean and safe. They also operate the incoming phone lines and supervise the gift shop and exhibition spaces.



d. Audience

The Museum's visitor book, TripAdvisor page, visitor surveys and general feedback, between 2017 – 2021 reveal that:

- The predominance of our visitors are either visiting the town, friends, family or taking a holiday in the region. The number of local resident visitors has increased as a result of increased marketing.
- Visitors consistently rate the Museum as Excellent year on year.
- There is continued feedback on the absence of a lift with elderly or infirm visitors struggling to make the journey up the stairs.

Previously the target of the Museum was to reach over 25,000 visitors in its opening four years. The figures for 2014 and 2016 are skewed due to counting visitors in the Market Place during Heritage Day events. Approximately 6,000 visitors were added per year in these cases. With this taken into account the average visitor number per year from 2012 to 2017 was 25,600 approximately. The following is a record of annual visitor numbers from 2017 to January 2022. Visitors are currently counted manually using a hand-operated counter, with each visitor entering the building through the main entrance counted. There are additional visitors who are not accounted for, who visit the basement, café space, Crossley Engines and toilets.

2017-18 (April -March)	2018-19 (April - March)	2019-20 (April -March)	2020-21* (April -March)	2021-2022* (June - Jan)	Breakdown
22,242	21,391	23,312	797	6975	Total
14959	14187	17037	576	5633	Adults
4669	3901	3872	98	1124	Children
2614	2735	2403	123	218	Groups (e.g. schools, societies etc)

N.B Please note these figures are 1st April - 31st March (Except Covid affected data from March 2020)*

Income from visitors annually has varied significantly and has contributed to funding of the Museum as follows:

Item	2017-18 (July-April)	2018-2019	2019-20	2020-21
Shop	£7,421	£7,004	£5,113	£518
Roof	£6,274	£5,588	£5,588	£0
Donations	£6,753	£6,705	£6,493	£1,303
Events	£2,280	£941	£700	£0
Other	£378	£328	£388	£0

As well as survey evidence from daytime visitors, the collection of data from people attending events and lectures shows that:

- There is a group of local residents who regularly come to the Museum
- There are enthusiasts who will travel from outside the area for specialist exhibitions and lectures, such as MG enthusiasts, participants in embroidery and quilting

workshops and other specialist events. The visibility of these events is dependent on marketing strategies.

Non-visitor surveys suggest that more people may come to the Museum if:

- Lift installed to upper gallery
- The Museum aspect of the County Hall was made more obvious
- Exhibitions and events determined around individual interests were conducted.

e. Access

Access to the Museum is by a central stairwell to all floors. Plans to incorporate a lift to the upper two storeys was denied at planning stage during a refurbishment project of the building between 2010-2012. However, a lift was installed to basement level, providing access to the café, a permanent Crossley Engine display, education room, and toilet/changing facilities. The touch screen interactive which is currently located in the gallery will be moved to the basement to provide access to the eHive database and other digital museum content. This also avoids any obvious characteristics of a specific device for disabled visitors, seeking instead to provide a system of equal benefit to all visitors. Improving accessibility to information, artefacts, events and educative facilities wherever possible will be a Key Aim of 2022-26. This is in part due to an ever existing awareness of the physical restrictions of the building.

A Key Aim in the 2022-2026 plan is the re-application for a lift, giving lift access to the upper floors as well as the basement.

f. Environmental sustainability

The Museum is committed to finding opportunities to reduce its carbon footprint, reduce waste, and to partner with suppliers of sustainable focus. Since 2015 the Museum has moved to a regular recycling collection operation for its waste. This includes paper, cardboard and derivatives, metals and plastics. The local collection service does not accept glass recycling, and the Museum will continue to seek suitable opportunities to increase its recycling quota.

Light fittings are predominantly LED based which limits the power consumption of the Museum during open hours. However, halogen spotlights remain in the Attic galleries as per the specification of the Museum's 2012 refurbishment. In 2021 an energy audit was conducted in the Museum, with recommendations for energy savings. A Key Aim for the next period is to convert the Museum's light usage to 100% LED with smart control and to upgrade the heating system with a smart control system.

g. Finance

The Museum is currently funded by Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council. Previous grant provision by Vale of White Horse District Council (VWHDC) ceased in 2018. The Town Council in 2022-23 will provide a total of £245,500 to fund the service and maintain the County Hall.

Income generation in the Museum is achieved through eight recognised channels: grants received through external funding bodies, donations received by both public users and private/corporate donations, miscellaneous income, events, retail, roof visits, and commission received from exhibition sales.

The Museum increased public awareness of the Museum's requirement for donation based income through the installation of dedicated signage and staff training to increase visitors' awareness verbally in their introductions. Consequently the Museum increased its income from donations by 500% by the end of 2019. The impact of Covid on opening and visitor numbers has significantly affected all lines of income. Our target is to recover visitor numbers and income stability by 2024, representing a return to normal Museum activity once the pandemic passes.

The Museum is in a fortunate position financially thanks to the continued support within the membership of Abingdon Town Council. Nevertheless, as part of the Key Aims of 2022-2026 efficiency savings and increased income will be increasingly important targets to ensure long-term resilience.

h. Collection

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council owns collections spanning a significant period of the town's history. They include social history (working life and personal life), costume and textiles, fine art, fossils, archaeology, and a collection of photographs and ephemera. The collection also includes a small natural history section.

There are three primary objectives of the Museum with regards to its collection for 2022-2026:

- Display and Conserve – to continue displaying the collection in interesting and engaging ways and to ensure its preservation for the future
- Document – to catalogue the collections to enable the management of the collections to the highest possible standards and to preserve the information and stories linked to the objects
- Expand – to continue collecting items of Abingdon provenance to better explain the history and culture of the area, or items of national significance that would benefit the community and Town Council.

The entirety of the Museum's collection (not on display) is housed at the Museum Resource Centre (MRC) at Standlake, under a service level agreement with the Oxfordshire County Council Museums Service. The renewal of the lease is arranged on an annual basis. The provisional plan to utilise space in the renovated Guildhall as a museum store did not come to fruition. Procuring a suitable storage facility for the collections in Abingdon remains a long term aim. However, it is anticipated that the current arrangement will remain in place in the medium term.

i. Security

The County Hall Museum is a secure building. It has one entrance and exit to the front of the building, whilst the rear of the building has an entrance and exit during periods of opening of the basement café. The museum is only accessible by stairs, whilst the basement is accessible by lift and stairs. There are twelve CCTV security cameras positioned around the building:

1. Arcade facing front entrance
2. Foyer facing entrance
3. Rear of building, facing rear entrance
4. Stairwell first floor landing, facing Sessions gallery entrance
5. Sessions gallery, facing reception desk
6. Sessions gallery overlooking MG display
7. Attic gallery, facing reception desk
8. Attic gallery, middle display room
9. Cupola
10. West face of building, facing lift entrance
11. Basement, facing public facilities
12. Basement behind kitchen counter

In addition to its security cameras, the security firm Chris Lewis Fire & Security are contracted to maintain both the CCTV system and an intruder alarm system. This includes electronic door contacts, infrared sensors, and shot-bolt door locking mechanisms with an intercom access system.

Artefacts and art are stored in museum grade cases using conditioned 10mm glass and security locks. Cases are secured using a combination of electric locks, cam locks, and two-key locks. Case keys are stored in a key cabinet within the Museum office, with only the Collections Officer and Museum Manager possessing a key to this cabinet.

The roof of the Museum is a potentially hazardous place, and for the security of visitors and staff/volunteers the roof is only open to visitors under the supervision of a member of staff/volunteer.

Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council holds a security contract with Oxford Security Services Ltd. Oxford Security are contracted to respond to any alarm outside of the Museum's operating hours of 9am-5pm Monday-Friday, and 9am-4.15pm Saturday-Sunday. During opening hours Museum staff respond first to any alarm situation. The Museum is part of the MCRS Storennet network, with a dedicated site number and digital radio which can be used to call in emergencies to Storennet and directly to Thames Valley Police.

In April 2015 the Museum security position was reviewed by OHM Ltd who praised the current security measures. They provided a security framework and the suggestion that Environmental Visual Audits are carried out regularly. The Museum will increase the frequency of this report and complete monthly EVAs.

j. Tourism

Museum surveys reveal that, from a cross-section of visitors, 65% are tourists to Abingdon. One of Abingdon's greatest assets is its heritage: there are over 200 listed buildings – one of the highest ratios of listed buildings per square km in the country. The Museum is located in the 'finest freestanding town hall' in the country, and there is some public availability of historic gardens and grounds. However, public accessibility of Abingdon's heritage is limited to the Museum, Abbey grounds, one historic room in the Guildhall complex, and limited opening of the former Abbey buildings in the summer. Abingdon Museum is located in the centre of the town in the most architecturally prominent building in the area: as such the Museum is the principal leisure amenity for tourists within the centre.

Abingdon Museum's tourism strategy is largely dependent upon the cohesion of tourism efforts of the town as a whole. The Friends of Abingdon are currently seeking an HLF grant to create a sustainable business model for opening three Medieval buildings, increasing the culture offer of the town. This may be an opportunity to work with the Friends in co-ordinating interpretation and permanent exhibits, as well as events, group tourism and co-ordinating a cohesive heritage offer to the tourist market.

The following list shows the current exhibition schedule for the first part of the forward plan period; the exhibitions are partially chosen as a result of public survey analysis, as well as focusing on promoting local artistic talent, providing Abingdon with touring exhibitions, and attracting tourism through exhibitions with combining both local and national foci.

Museum: temporary exhibitions programme	June to July 2021	HapticArt - Abingdon Treasures
	July to Sept 2021	David Melling - Drawing Stories; Fairy tales & Wildlife
	Oct to Dec 2021	Martin Wackenier Abingdon in True Colours
	Jan to Mar 2022	Morland; A family business
	Apr to Jun 2022	The Platinum Years in Abingdon
	July to Sept 2022	The Abingdon Ichthyosaurs - Grendelius by Megan Jacobs
	Oct to Dec 2022	Kate Hammersley - Common Ground
	Jan to Mar 2023	Planes Trains and Automobiles - RAF Abingdon , GWR, MG.
	July to Sept 2023	Abingdon's Lost Monuments
	Oct to Dec 2023	Abingdon Quilters
Museum: digital projects	July to Sept 21	The Abingdon Ichthyosaurs
	Oct to Dec 21	Abingdon Fair - Damascus Youth - ACER
	Jan to Mar 22	Women of Abingdon
	Apr to Jun 22	Town Twinning / Platinum Jubilee Youth and Elderly oral history project
	July to Sept 22	South Asian History month - Couldrey India paintings and poetry - Festival Archaeology
	Oct to Dec 22	Black History Month - Museum at night - halloween

k. SWOT/PESTLE analysis

SWOT (Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats) – internal analysis

<p>Strengths</p> <p>Grade 1 listed building in town centre location Displays still considered to be of high standard following refurbishment in 2012. Conditions and equipment favourable for conserving and displaying artefacts. Roof views accessible to visitors and tickets generate income Museum is well supported by Abingdon-on-Thames Town Council Museum has professional staff Museum has a team of volunteers Museum is supported by Museum Friends Museum is embedded in museum community and works co-operatively with others</p>	<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>As of April 2018 all funding comes from a single source (ATTC) Local Authorities are experiencing constraints on funding No lift to upper floors which house main exhibition areas Museum does not yet have a permanent museum collections store Creative planning limited by policies and procedures. Local Residents unlikely to visit frequently unless special exhibitions take their interest, inevitably resulting in a plateau of visitor numbers. Sections of the public do not engage with the museum at all</p>
<p>Opportunities</p> <p>Closer working with community groups, clubs and societies Continue to develop more activities that link with National initiatives such as Museums at Night, Archaeology week etc, to raise profile of Museum Installation of a lift would significantly improve accessibility and probably increase visitor numbers Increase presence online and on social media raises awareness of exhibitions and events Private views/events could be held in working hours to reduce cost and possibly attract larger audience from non-working population.</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>Age of building and cost of repairs due to Grade 1 listing Cost of heating building Vandalism of external facades as a result of town centre position.</p>

PESTLE (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental) – external and stakeholder analysis

<p>Political</p> <p>2017 – new local MP</p>	<p>Economic</p>
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<p>Aspire – the OU and OCC Museums partnership is currently supporting museums in this area ATC has adopted a new strategy document for 2019-23 ATC is preparing a new Neighbourhood Plan Unitary authority process may affect ATC Museum under close scrutiny as it currently receives 1/7th of TC budget</p>	<p>Abingdon-on-Thames and Vale of White Horse District Council affected by high business rate increases. VWHDC no longer supports the Museum. Abingdon BID ongoing English Heritage move to charitable status may affect on-going funding for repairs and maintenance Arts Council grants are open to museum applicants National Lottery committed to increases in funding for HLF</p>
<p>Social</p> <p>Abingdon Museum Friends need to be more involved in Museum activities Museum needs to be seen as part of the community with strong links to local groups Participation in Heritage weekend and other local history initiatives Sections of the population do not visit the museum, particularly young people, people from ethnic minorities and disabled people.</p>	<p>Technological</p> <p>Websites, Facebook, Twitter etc. will become even more important for marketing and audience engagement New digital initiatives (YouTube channel, blog, online craft sessions) have the potential to increase audience Museum features on a local tourism phone app but does not yet have its own app eHive cloud-based catalogue system offers opportunities to link more collections information with the website bandwidth and upload speed on the Museum's internet connection are not fit for purpose</p>
<p>Legal</p>	<p>Environmental</p> <p>Housing increase in town could increase traffic which is already heavy, potentially preventing visitors from wanting to stay in town. Museum custom is directly affected by tourism levels in Abingdon Museum is part of a Council-wide energy audit to reduce its carbon footprint Museum is committed to reducing plastic in the shop</p>

7 Vision

A Free Museum For All

The year 2019 saw the centenary of the decision by the Town Council to establish a Museum in the County Hall, and 2020 was the centenary of the first meeting of the Museum Committee. From the first time the Museum opened its doors, it has been free to visit for the public. It is the same now and it will be so in the future.

The Museum will continue to offer free events for families with traditional crafts and hands-on activities. It will continue to offer free in-house education sessions for all schools, and it will continue to run a programme of temporary exhibitions, which will be free to visit. It will increase its engagement with community groups, participating in town-wide events and collaborating on exhibitions and public talks.

The Museum aims to be at the centre of the town's heritage activities, but it will also improve the link with Roysse Court, the Abbey buildings and St Nicolas Church to present the unified historic core of Abingdon.

Building Back Better

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has made itself felt at the Museum as much as everywhere else. The Museum is well-supported by the Town Council, but there is a possibility, particularly in the wake of the pandemic, that funds will be prioritised for social services in the next few years. The Museum has been closed for part of 2020 and 2021, the exhibition programme was put on hold, there were no opportunities for volunteers, and while all staff continued to work their contracted hours, these were concentrated on activities away from the Museum.

The Museum is fully committed to taking the motto "Building Back Better" on board. This means that the Museum will not simply return to its pre-Covid way of operating, but that it will take the opportunity to make changes and improve its service. It aims not just to re-engage with its previous audience, but to come back "bigger and better".

The overarching aim will be to expand the Museum's audience base. This will be achieved through different means. First, by improving physical access to the building, applying for and installing an enclosed external lift to the Sessions Gallery and Attic Galleries.

Second, by widening digital access to its collections, through intensifying its engagement on social media and expanding the representation of the collections on the website, the blog and YouTube.

Third, by close analysis of the current situation in terms of visitors and non-visitors and reaching out to those groups who are currently not visiting. The Museum will continue to participate in the Audience Champions project, which is geared towards a detailed visitor analysis and finding ways of targeting a wider audience. It will actively reach out to community groups to find ways of making the Museum welcoming to the people which those groups represent.

The Museum will seek funding opportunities for projects and development from external sources, such as the Art Fund, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the South East Museums Development Service. Funds are often targeted towards projects with specific outcomes or are linked to national events. The Museum will make the most of these opportunities by keeping up to date with what is available and applying where the conditions most closely match the Museum's aims and goals.

Being part of the Town Council's Vision

Abingdon Town Council's vision is "to develop an inclusive community so that Abingdon is the place where everyone wants to live and where the wellbeing of residents is prioritised. In developing this community the town will be one which is environmentally sustainable, vibrant, resilient and safe."

In keeping with the Town Council's vision the Museum aims to be the place which everyone wants to visit, where all are welcome, and which contributes to residents' wellbeing. It wants to be a place to learn and to have fun, to relax or to be stimulated, to revel in the familiar or to discover something new, and above all the place where people connect with Abingdon's history, heritage and identity, whether they are residents or visitors to the town.

The Museum is also committed to the Town Council's goals on environmental sustainability and will implement measures to save energy and resources. The Museum, like the rest of the council, has been subjected to an energy audit, which will help to identify the areas where savings can be made.

8 Key Aims

Key Aim 1

To improve physical access to the County Hall and the Museum displays.

- Plan a new lift facility to provide access to the upper floors or the first floor only.
- Obtain permission from Historic England for installation of a lift.
- Secure the funding for building a lift facility, potentially by applying for grants.

Key Aim 2

To widen the audience base of the Museum and attract those who currently do not engage with the Museum. To increase awareness of the Museum in the town and further afield, and to grow visitor numbers.

- Continue to participate in the Audience Champions project by conducting detailed visitor surveys, analyse the data and use it to inform future activities
- Engage with young people and work with them to make the Museum more attractive to them
- Build on existing training and knowledge and work to make the Museum a welcoming space for people with dementia and those with cognitive differences such as autism
- Use local media (print media and radio) to promote the Museum's exhibitions and activities
- Make the Museum's online presence more impactful by improving the website

Key Aim 3

To take back the end room in the Attic for temporary exhibitions and establish a programme of exhibitions for the space

- Move the Town silver back to Roysse Court once a suitable space is established there
- Generate ideas for changing displays in the Attic with an emphasis on the Museum's collections

Key Aim 4

To continue to provide workshop sessions for schools, family events, holiday activities and lectures linked to the history of Abingdon, local interest and the exhibition programme.

- To rebuild the programme of in-person education workshops after the Covid-19 pandemic and to continue developing new and interesting workshops while keeping open the option of online workshops
- Key into local, regional and national events like Heritage Day, Festival of Archaeology and ATOM Festival
- Collaborate with other interest groups such as Friends of Abingdon, AAHS and Geological Society on events, lectures and workshops

Key Aim 5

To develop the use of café space as a climate emergency café and educational resource. To explore alternative uses to create a dynamic and adaptable community space, not reliant on a single function

- Consider different options and elicit input from the Town Council and community groups
- Maintain access to the other spaces in the basement, the toilets, Crossley Engine display, computer access point and Kempster Room

Key Aim 6

To establish a computer access point to the collections in the basement to cater for visitors unable to access the upper floors without a lift.

- Install an up to date computer or touchscreen in the basement
- Provide access to the eHive database and other content generated by the Museum (digital albums, videos, audio content)
- Conduct a project to improve eHive content by putting all objects on display onto it
- Conduct a secondary project to include highlights from the reserve collections on eHive
- Assess the options to enable public access to the photo collections catalogue

Key Aim 7

To establish a digital strategy for the Museum to make the digital component a consistent and structured part of the overall Museum experience.

- Establish a social media schedule to plan in advance for posts across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest
- Participate in online challenges, themes and campaigns with other Museums and heritage organisations (for example local history month), using popular hashtags to maximise visibility

- Increase digital representation of the collection through online galleries, YouTube videos and audio tracks
- Invest in the technology which will enable quality video production and live streaming