

ABINGDON TOWN COUNCIL

Report to	Community Committee
Meeting date	4 June 2024
Report author	Dan Sancisi
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Report of Museum Manager

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To inform Members about the current news, activities and events at the Abingdon County Hall Museum. (no decision required, report to be noted)

2. Summary

- 2.1 Updates on the current exhibition, events and key indicators.
2.2 Updated information about 'The Basement Museum'.
2.3 One Planet Abingdon update.
2.4 Fossil specimen donation/long loan offer.

3. Action required

- 3.1 Members are requested to note the report.

4. Link to strategic plan and objectives

- 4.1 KO2: To develop a resilient, sustainable town which will provide a home for residents now and in the future.
4.1.1 The Museum's presence in Abingdon County Hall sustains the condition of the building, maintaining it for future generations, enhancing its town centre context by articulating the history of Abingdon.
4.1.2 Facilitating a climate emergency centre in the café promotes public engagement with sustainability and develops skills and knowledge about reuse, repair and recycling.
4.2 KO4: To work with community partners to support those who are vulnerable and in need and to create opportunities to increase social inclusivity.
4.2.1 Working with One Planet Abingdon creates an opportunity for diverse communities to access free events and support, also to engage with the Museum.

5 **Background**

- 5.1 The Museum continues to operate its temporary exhibition programme, educational workshops and events.
- 5.2 The owner of 4 East Saint Helen Street, Mr Mike Russell, asked the Museum if it would take 'The Basement Museum' into its care and operate a visit by appointment system to keep it running.
- 5.3 One Planet Abingdon has developed its schedule of events and activities and is firmly established as the Climate Emergency Centre of Abingdon.
- 5.4 A local Palaeontologist and collector has offered the long loan or donation of two fossilised marine reptile specimens for display in the Museum.

6 **Key information and options**

Visitors

- 6.1 The Museum attracted 21,195 visitors from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

Exhibitions

- 6.2 Our current exhibition 'MG100, evolution of an icon.' Opened on 6 April after several months of research and collaboration with the MG Car club.
- 6.3 The exhibition showcases many items loaned by the car club as well as objects from the museum collection.

Collections

- 6.4 The Museum Manager and Collections Officer have reorganised the fossil display in the Attic Gallery to display the pliosaur cervical vertebrae, featured in Professor Martill and Megan Jacobs article.
- 6.5 Their scientific paper demonstrated that the Abingdon Pliosaur fossils are from the biggest proven pliosaur discovered to date (at the time of publication).
- 6.6 The new display was launched during the ATOM festival in March 2024.

Events

- 6.7 The ATOM Festival week was an opportunity for the Museum to host events on Saturday 16 March 2024.
- 6.8 Oxford Geology Trust's (OGT) object handling and specimen discussion workshop, 'Boneheads' social media blogging Q & A session and Jeff Wallis' fossil display and talks formed the line-up for the day.
- 6.9 The Trust were overwhelmed with keen visitors wishing to learn about geology and fossils, OGT's hard work and dedication to the subject was rewarded by over 300 visitors.
- 6.10 Ben Thomas' 'Boneheads live' session split the day in two with morning and afternoon seminars held in the Kempster Room, which can be viewed on YouTube https://youtu.be/JKVNT2OVj7s?si=CSbpdroO6_WTriHb .
- 6.11 In the Attic Gallery alongside the new pliosaur display, local Palaeontologist Jeff Wallis talked about Jurassic Abingdon to an interested audience, adding a narrative to the reworked interpretation panels and fossil displays.
- 6.12 Easter crafts activity held on 10 April 2024 was very well attended with almost 100 families visiting the session.
- 6.13 The Museum 'Crafting Crew' continue to produce innovative events throughout

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- the school holiday periods.
- 6.14 The team will be hosting ‘...join us for bookmaking’ on the 29 May 2024 during the school half term break.

Education

- 6.15 Jennifer Doran, Museum Educator, has delivered many popular and very well received workshops since joining the Museum team in 2016.
- 6.16 She has notified your officers that she is moving on to pastures new at the end of the current academic year.
- 6.17 She emphasises her satisfaction with the experience of leading education at Abingdon Museum and carries forward many fond memories of collaborating with the Museum team and working with the children.
- 6.18 She will remain as part of the ‘Crafting Crew’ so will still be a valued team member albeit as volunteer.
- 6.19 Your officers are seeking a replacement freelance Museum Educator.

Key performance indicators of the Museum from 1 April 2023 to 20 August 2023.

- 6.20 Shop sales totalled £7,433 equating to £0.35 per visitor. (Includes talks and events and commission sales.)
- 6.21 Donations received are £6,741 averaging at £0.32 per visitor. (Includes £1,170 from Abingdon Museum Friends.)
- 6.22 Roof takings of £4,806 have a visitor average spend of £0.23. The number of roof visitors varies due to seasonal changes of weather restricting access.

Abingdon Museum Friends (AMF)

- 6.23 Your Officers met with the secretary of the Abingdon Museum friend to discuss the successful gift aid scheme and opportunities for donating to the Museum or assisting purchases.
- 6.24 The Friends purchased a limestone Saddle Quern for our education and activities workshops. The local stone masons Abingdon Stone and Marble manufactured it, using the ancient quern stone in the museum collection for reference.
- 6.25 The AMF donations gift aid scheme has increased the value of donations that were gift aided by 25%.
- 6.26 The scheme is certainly successful and will continue with the kind and generous support of the Museum Friends.

The Basement Museum

- 6.27 At 4 East Saint Helen Street, in Abingdon town centre, the owner Mr Mike Russell has created a museum space in the building’s basement, due to extraordinary finds he made while excavating it.
- 6.28 He has ‘curated’ the space to display artefacts such as roman pottery, clay pipes, a functional water well, and many other curiosities. Well-lit cases present the material beautifully, he has also made interpretation panels to inform visitors about the history of this usual cluster of archaeology.
- 6.29 Currently the space is rarely open to the public, as he is advanced in years he has decided he cannot maintain it and looks to secure a future for his personal project.
- 6.30 Your officers are of the opinion that this is an excellent opportunity to keep this part of Abingdon’s history accessible to the public at low cost to the Museum service.

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- 6.31 We would operate an appointment system to view the Basement Museum during our normal operating hours. This can be facilitated by your senior officers or duty managers.
- 6.32 The Museum Manager recommends councillors visit the museum by contacting himself to arrange. The Basement Museum has now stairwell access which replaces the previous precarious access of ladder down a trapdoor way!

One Planet Abingdon

- 6.33 Your officers have created an opportunity for collaboration with One Planet on a mini exhibition starting on 2 July 2024 and ending on 28 July 2024.
- 6.34 The exhibition title 'The Fashion Footprint: Stories from the wardrobe' is a reworking of a past theme for OPA based on fashion sustainability and showcases an interactive event originating from the "Empowering Voices" workshops led by One Planet Abingdon Climate Emergency Centre volunteer and actor, Khairika Sinani.
- 6.35 They created a transformative journey delving into the art of creative writing and performance concentrating on climate and environmental justice resulting in an alternative fashion show.
- 6.36 Your Officers intend to produce more collaborative exhibitions with the CEC in the future.

Potential fossil donation or loan

- 6.37 The Museum Manger is currently exploring the logistics and structural viability of the Museum building to acquiring two large marine reptile specimens to complement the existing Ichthyosaur specimen in the Attic Galleries of the Museum.
- 6.38 A local Palaeontologist has offered the specimens to the Museum on condition that they are displayed appropriately and prominently in the collection.
- 6.39 This is a unique opportunity to acquire the fossils which are extremely rare due to the completeness of the skeletons and also in the scarcity of such discoveries.
- 6.40 There are considerable cost implications to displaying such specimens, glass cases must be manufactured and coherent mounting systems will be required to present the bones securely and aesthetically.
- 6.41 Such an addition to the permanent collection will draw in greater audiences and raise the profile of Abingdon Museum in general.
- 6.42 Funding will be required to progress this project and your officers will present a report on budget and grant opportunities in due course when sufficient information is collated.

7 Climate change/green implications

- 7.1 No additional climate change / green implications to report.

8 Financial/budget implications

- 8.1 There are no additional financial implications regarding the current budget.

9 **HR implications**

9.1 There are no current HR implications.

Dan Sancisi, Museum Manager, 20 May 2024