

Members Interest
N/A

Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Joint Archive Committee 23 June 2020

Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Archive Service: Impact of COVID-19 on the Service

Recommendation(s)

1. That the committee notes the report on the impact of Covid-19 and plans for recovery.

Report of Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities (Staffordshire County Council) and Director of Housing and Community Services (Stoke on Trent City Council)

Reasons for Recommendations

Summary

2. The Service has inevitably been impacted by COVID-19 and the introduction of the control measures including social distancing and the lockdown. We have responded to this by adapting our services, our offer and working flexibly.

3. The impact has had negative and positive outcomes as closure of onsite services meant access to collections was withdrawn and face to face engagement and contact with users ceased. Positive developments have been a growth in online engagement which has provided alternative routes of contact for users and volunteers and the potential for sustained development in this area.

Response to Covid-19

4. At the end of March both Staffordshire County Council and Stoke on Trent City Council took the difficult decision to close their archive and heritage services. Stoke on Trent City Archives closed on 19 March with Staffordshire Record Office, William Salt Library, Lichfield History Access Point and County Museum offices closing on the 23 March. Shortly after a national lockdown was announced by the UK government.

5. Whilst the physical services closed to the public this did not mean a complete shutdown. Most staff were able to work from home and many had the foresight to copy catalogues and documents enabling work on projects and collections to continue. Limited numbers of staff continued to check the sites to ensure the security of collections and keep the offices operational for use. Team meetings and 1-1s were moved to Skype and Microsoft Teams to ensure staff felt connected and to check in on their wellbeing. The head of service introduced a fortnightly team update for all staff to ensure awareness of the work of colleagues and key messages around response and recovery were shared.

6. A remote enquiry service has been maintained and whilst the number of enquiries is fewer, it has reduced by 25% based on a comparison of Staffordshire Record Office statistics. The number of copying, research and digital orders was more significantly affected as staff were unable to access collections to fulfil requests.

7. Staffordshire County Council and partners established a 'Supporting Vulnerable Self Isolator Cell' to support those in most need. This included establishing a call centre to process requests for emergency food and care, a central food parcel manufacture hub in Stafford, and local District Hubs for food parcel distribution. The Council has then been working with the community to deliver parcels vulnerable self-isolators.

8. 75% of Archive and Heritage Service staff volunteered through the Staffordshire County Council iCount scheme with 40% of them supporting the Vulnerable Self Isolator Cell led by the Library and Arts Service. The small team at Stoke on Trent City Archives also played their part in supporting the response with one member of the team working on the contact centre helpline. For both services the work included:

- Assisting at a district food hub
- Dealing with calls about coronavirus in call centres
- Following up with calls to vulnerable self-isolators to validate data and confirm food supplies
- Shopping for food for vulnerable self-isolators

7. The involvement of staff in the response phase has now significantly reduced as demand for the response has reduced and the service plans for recovery.

Increasing online engagement

8. During the temporary closure, the service focused upon increasing the output of social media, setting up a new volunteers' blog [The Learning Room](#), and producing two newsletters per month instead of one. Initial analysis of statistics has shown:

- Twitter impressions up 65%
- Facebook page views up 236%
- Staffordshire Past Track views up 28%
- Engagement is much more interactive with users commenting more frequently

9. A new YouTube channel was setup for the [Staffordshire History Centre](#) with launch of content timed for Staffordshire Day on 1 May. The channel has received 656 views since its launch. The content includes 'Staffordshire Moments' highlight interesting stories from Staffordshire's history. It also includes 'How to' guides explaining how to search records on Find My Past. These online guides will be extended to aid reopening of onsite services by providing alternatives to staff advice.

10. The Service embraced Staffordshire Day online contributing to the social media feeds of both parent authorities and generating its own content. This generated a spike of impressions on Twitter contributing to the overall increase.

Impact on mental health and wellbeing

10. A recent think piece report by Staffordshire County Council's Recovery Group highlighted the impact of the pandemic on mental health and wellbeing:

The pandemic has had a considerable impact on mental health and wellbeing, with people reporting increased levels of negative feelings and behaviours - 49% report feeling more anxious/depressed, 38% have slept less/less well, 35% have eaten more/less healthy food, 19% have drunk more alcohol and 19% have argued more with those they live with¹.

11. Feedback from volunteers and members of the public about the work of the Service to support wellbeing has demonstrated a positive impact on wellbeing:

I am writing to thank you and your colleagues for enabling me to continue enjoying the work on place names and transcribing historical documents. I find this activity challenging but an enjoyable way of using my time during the current lockdown period, very good for staying sane when normal life is suddenly cancelled.

I do not use Facebook even though I am very confident with new technology so receiving regular newsletters by email has helped me stay in touch and learn about other archives projects and promotions.

.....to say how much I appreciate the emails your staff have been sending to volunteers particularly when other in-box messages are so dispiriting. Hope we can get back to normality soon.

Thank you for your prompt reply and indeed your service during this difficult time for us all. You're all doing a grand job!

Thank you so much for all your help, it's been brilliant reading up about the history of the pub. We can't wait to share it with everyone! Once things are open again we'll be sure to come down and find out some more.

The feedback has also shown valuable support for local businesses such as pubs using the time to research the history of the premises ready for when they can reopen.

Recovery

12. The service is planning to return cohorts of staff to Staffordshire Record Office, William Salt Library and County Museum offices from 15 June. This depends on the sign off by the Health and Safety team of Covid-19 risk assessments and implementation of social distancing at the sites. This will enable a fuller remote service offer with orders for copies, research and digital photography being able to be fulfilled. Many staff will continue to work from home.

13. The second phase will be the return of an appointments only/restricted numbers public service at Staffordshire Record Office. This will begin at some point from mid-July once social distancing measures and necessary equipment are in place. Risk

¹ <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/life-under-lockdown-coronavirus-uk>

assessments are being drawn up to implement measures for staff and members of the public. Stoke on Trent City Archives is working towards resuming services from August as it has two vacancies within the team.

14. Outreach, talks and engagement activities will be restricted to online platforms for the foreseeable future. Onsite volunteering is not planned to restart now and the Service will continue to provide access to online and copied material to facilitate cataloguing, indexing and project research. Free access to Staffordshire content on Find My Past has been negotiated for volunteers to support research for projects whilst the service remains closed.

Impact

15. The most significant impact on the service is the loss of onsite visitors and a corresponding reduction in income. This is estimated to have reduced by 50% however this may improve as more remote services become available.

16. There is a potential loss of onsite volunteers as some may not return to the service; a significant number may fall within the vulnerable isolator/ shielded category. The service will continue to work hard to maintain links with volunteers.

17. The planned restructure of the service was suspended and this will impact on delivery of MTFs. Several resignations and retirements within the service has also meant that there will be a loss of experienced staff.

18. Work was temporarily delayed for several externally funded projects however most funders have been very supportive. There has been flexibility about timescales of projects and extension of completion dates.

Next steps

19. The immediate priority is the return of limited numbers of staff working in cohorts from mid-June. This will enable the resumption of further remote services and implementation of physical adaptations to public services at Staffordshire Record Office. Phased reopening at the Record Office is planned from mid-July dependent on delivery of PPE. Reopening services at Stoke on Trent is planned to take place later from August.

20. The Service will continue its increased digital engagement to support volunteers, engage people who are still self-isolating, and support recovery of remote and physical services. Plans will also be developed for the return of volunteers to the onsite service and further activities to combat loneliness and isolation from September.

Appendix 1

Equalities implications:

Access to the service is now impacted by an individual's ability to access online resources. Access to Find My Past is available for service volunteers and the Library

Service has access to Ancestry for registered library users. Resumption of onsite services will enable wider access where digital access is not an option.

Legal implications:

The Service continued to respond to enquiries ensuring compliance with information legislation.

Resource and Value for money implications:

The suspension of services has impacted on income with a 50% reduction estimated. It has also delayed the delivery of MTFs savings for Staffordshire County Council.

Risk implications:

There was a risk that externally funded projects could be delayed but this has been mitigated through constructive discussions with funders. The National Archives have adopted a flexible approach to Archive Service Accreditation and supported services during this uncertain period. Arts Council England have postponed all Museum Accreditation reviews for a year.

Climate Change implications:

With the majority of staff working from home there has been a reduction in travel to the workplace and energy use. However this may be offset by increased heating, lighting and broadband use. Strongrooms have continued to be maintained with essential checks on collections.

Health Impact Assessment screening:

Staff wellbeing may have been negatively impacted by isolation and lack of social interaction in the same way that users and volunteers have been affected. Service team meetings have been moved online to Microsoft Teams and all managers encouraged to deliver 1-1s and check in on staff. The head of service produces a fortnightly staff update to ensure all staff are aware of what their colleagues are doing and the collective response and recovery to the pandemic.

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List of Background Papers

Papers	Contact/Directorate/ext number
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