

Members Interest
N/A

Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Joint Archive Committee 12 November 2020

Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Archive Service: Staffordshire History Centre Project Update

Recommendation(s)

1. That the committee notes the update on the Staffordshire History Centre project.

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. Work on the Staffordshire History Centre Project has continued to make progress since the meeting of Joint Archives Committee on 23 June 2020. The key areas of progress has been upon the audience research and learning.
3. The restrictions due to COVID-19 have impacted on the timescales for the project. Changes to the programme and the way work is completed have been discussed with the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). With their agreement, the timetable for submission of the round two application has now been agreed as 1 March 2021, pending the outcome of the mid-stage review in December.

Audience research

4. Considerable progress has been made on this work completed by the Audience Agency. An online survey took place during May and June receiving 440 responses. The aims of the survey were to understand the motivations for visiting, identify key market drivers, barriers to visiting, and understand more about users and other cultural venues they visited.
5. There was a spread of respondents across age groups, however there was a bias to those over 55. Most respondents were from Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent and 69% of respondents were female. About half of the respondents had visited the service before with Staffordshire Record Office the most frequently visited site.
6. The key motivations for in person visits were family and local history. Most people found out about the service offer through the email newsletter (which had included a link to the survey) followed by Facebook. There was high social media use amongst visitors with Facebook the most popular platform. The main motivations for accessing the social media offer was to keep up to date with talks and events and to see behind the scenes images of documents and objects.

7. 46% of respondents planned to visit the service in the future. The main barriers to visiting were lack of free time or awareness that it was possible to visit the service in person. Some respondents stated they lived too far away and others cited practical concerns such as lack of childcare or time, lack of transport, distance from a bus stop or a perceived lack of parking nearby. Some referred to feeling unwelcome, intimidated, or unsure of the process. The responses related to accessing the archives with little reference to exhibitions or events, except from two respondents who stated they were unaware of these programmes.

8. Two online focus groups were organised comprising a mix of current users and non-users of the service recruited from the online survey. The aims were to gain a better understanding of motivations for heritage attendance, expectations and preferences about the offer, perceptions of the offer, and test the proposed Staffordshire History Centre offer.

9. The two groups expressed interests in exhibitions and events relating to the Staffordshire Hoard and the pottery industries, which was expected. They also suggested themes around local industries, ancient history, social and political history' and how local history speaks to the contemporary experience.

10. Perceptions were very positive about the atmosphere at the William Salt Library, sense of community from the volunteers who work at the service, helpful, friendly polite staff, welcoming to children at the school sessions, and wanting to see further expansion of the digital offer.

11. Responses to the Staffordshire History Centre offer were unanimously positive citing the plans as 'modern', 'welcoming', and 'spacious'. In particular people felt it would be less intimidating, a place to pop in, and there was interest in exhibitions and the facilities.

12. Positive suggestions were made about thematic exhibitions with titles that were specific rather than vague. Talks and tours were popular and there was interest in them being available elsewhere in the county and not just Stafford.

13. Analysis of responses around the digital offer was that clear messaging was important about the ability to visit. Segmentation of the responses showed a mix of digital only users and digital and potential onsite visitor groups.

14. Audience Agency are now using the research to develop a Marketing Strategy for the Staffordshire History Centre.

Learning

14. Since the last update Robin Johnson has completed the research on the learning offer. The survey of local teachers received 31 responses which was a significant number during the national lockdown. Common themes about the learning offer were:

- a. Needs to enhance, enrich and be relevant to, the school curriculum
- b. Requires pupils to put their learning into context

- c. Essential to be child-friendly and appealing to pupils and teachers alike
- d. Must be inclusive and accessible to all
- e. Needs to offer hands-on engagement for pupils
- f. Must be something that the school cannot (or is unable to) provide easily
- g. Venue and activities should encourage 'awe & wonder' in pupils
- h. Offers value for money

15. Teachers were asked what the single most important thing was that the Staffordshire History Centre should offer. In free text responses the common items were:

- a. Interaction with real objects and archive material
- b. Must be fun, interactive and hands-on
- c. Help to explain change over time (chronology)
- d. Bring history to life
- e. Encourage pride in Local history
- f. Offer something that can't be done in school
- g. Provide new experiences
- h. Offer a range of activities

The responses were supportive of the service bringing the collections together and using them to deliver activities. The Archive and Heritage Service will have a unique offer combining archive collections alongside museum objects and William Salt Library books.

16. The consultant also spoke to potential partner organisations for delivery of learning activities including: The National Trust at Shugborough, Freedom Leisure who manage Stafford Borough Council's heritage sites, Brampton Museum in Newcastle under Lyme and Redfern's Cottage in Uttoxeter. Whilst the conversations were positive the ongoing pandemic has prevented further work in this area.

17. Seven 'virtual' learning sessions were written exclusively using images from the collections of Staffordshire Archives and Heritage on the following themes:

- Mystery Staffordshire Objects
- Staffordshire Timeline
- Staffordshire Portraits
- Victorian Stafford gaol
- Discover your local area
- Design your own manuscript
- Create your own coat of arms

These were made available to teachers during the March-July 2020 national lockdown and downloaded forty times.

18. Obtaining feedback from schools was very difficult due to the COVID-19 pandemic as teachers were focussed on the safe re-opening of classrooms. The feedback which was received was very positive. Children liked the resources, particularly the timeline. They gave children an insight into, appreciation of and pride in, Staffordshire's history. The activities were adaptable and sparked creativity within children particularly the 'Create your own coat of arms' and 'Locked in' activities.

19. The final report has recommended several activities to engage teachers with the Staffordshire History Centre project including:

- a. Teachers Network and CPD
- b. Work placement opportunities
- c. Initial Teacher Training sessions
- d. Arts Award offer
- e. Schools outreach making visits to promote the offer

20. Other recommendations include promoting the offer to schools, developing a package for schools to buy into and re-working activities to target family audiences at weekends. The report also suggests price ranges for the learning offer and recommends quality assurance awards to validate the offer.

Design and Interpretation

21. The design team, Pringle Richard Sharratt, have been recommissioned to update the design report once work on the Activity Plan is nearly complete. New work has focussed on increasing biodiversity within the garden at the site. An ecology report has been commissioned reporting on the current habitat.

22. Imagemakers have been recommissioned to update the Interpretation Plan. Their work will also include interpretation of the garden and restoration of the William Salt Library building.

Business and Evaluation Plans

23. Progress has been made on the Business Plan using the results of the audience research to inform the market analysis. Information from the learning research will be added to the section on potential income for the History Centre.

24. The Evaluation Plan will be updated once the Activity Plan is almost complete.

William Salt Library collection work

25. Work has resumed on the William Salt Library collection after NLHF agreed to reallocate the budget. This work is now being completed with support from the Collections Assistant to repackage recent accessions to the Library collections. The Assistant Librarian has continued working on cataloguing the collection prior to its relocation.

Capital funding

26. On 15 May 2019 Staffordshire County Council's Cabinet approved the preferred option to deliver the History Centre with an NLHF grant of £3.9m. This option included two floors of storage and assumed the retention of the archive outstore at Unit QB. The agreed capital contribution from the County Council was £0.861m.

27. Cabinet requested that a detailed business case be prepared which outlined the costs and benefits of increasing storage from two to four floors to address storage

issues for both the Archive and Heritage Service and the Information Governance Unit Record Centre. Both services store records in two separate spaces within a shared facility at Unit QB in Stafford. The lease of the unit ends in 2025 and is being reviewed under the Strategic Property Rationalisation programme for potential savings. The business case was separated into two elements to meet the timeline for the Staffordshire History Centre project.

28. On 4th November Informal Cabinet considered the business case for extending storage as part of the Staffordshire History Centre project. The preferred option was to increase storage from two floors to four floors. This option enables the release of the Archive out store, provides storage space for 55 years which could be rented out to generate income or be used as part of the transition storage for the Record Centre business case to vacate the whole of unit QB. It would enable the Archive and Heritage Service to operate wholly from one site. Planning permission is required for the fourth floor however Stafford Borough Council has said it would support a higher storage facility.

29. Informal Cabinet approved the following recommendations:

- a. It is recommended that Option Four is the preferred option to deliver the Staffordshire History Centre with a National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) grant, release the Unit QB Archive out store and provide additional Record Centre storage.
- b. That the planned capital investment of £6.332m is approved for the 4-storey extension of the Staffordshire Records Office (subject to confirmation of NLHF funding) and that this is added to the Council's capital programme.
- c. It is recommended that additional revenue provision is made of £0.196m from 2021/22 to meet the additional costs of this property venture.

30. Following this decision the County Council's capital contribution has increased to £1.894m , which means that the grant percentage for the project has reduced from 75% to 63%. The design proposals will be updated and the four-storey option will be presented at the mid-stage review with NLHF.

Timescales

31. The review of the programme considering COVID-19 means the new key dates are:

- Mid-stage review with National Lottery Heritage Fund 10 December 2020
- Assuming enough progress is achieved submission of Round 2 application 1 March 2020.

The project team continue to meet regularly with NLHF mentors to review progress.

32. The mid-stage review is a key milestone in which progress is assessed by NLHF. Detailed feedback will be provided on the review and if the project is passed it will then be able to submit a round 2 application in March.

Appendix 1

Equalities implications:

The National Archives, stakeholders, partners and staff have been involved in development of the project.

Legal implications:

Nominations to the development trust will be confirmed by legal teams in both authorities and taken through the appropriate corporate route.

Resource and Value for money implications:

The delivery of the Staffordshire History Centre will enable the Archive and Heritage Service to achieve a sustainable model for the future and deliver the MTFs saving of £468,000.

Risk implications:

There is a risk that funding will not be secured for any of the options. This will impact upon the accreditation status of the Archive and Heritage Service.

Climate Change implications:

The project balances online access and physical access to services and collections to offer options for remote use and not necessarily travel to multiple locations. Any new buildings will be compliant with modern standards for energy efficiency and minimise impacts on climate change. The project includes elements to improve the outcomes for wildlife and the environment.

Health Impact Assessment screening:

The project will offer opportunities for volunteers to get involved and add value to the service with support and accredited training programmes from staff. Volunteering provides many social benefits for individuals which can impact positively on health.

Report author:

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List of Background Papers

Papers

Contact/Directorate/ext number