

INFORMATION NOTE: NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE MUSEUM AND COMMUNITY FACILITY

REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER SERVICES

This information note provides an update on the North Hertfordshire Museum and Community Facility project following Council's decision on 11th November 2010 to proceed with the Hitchin Initiative sponsored 'community' proposal for Hitchin Town Hall now being taken forward by Hitchin Town Hall Ltd.

Project Issues

Since confirmation of the grant/loan from Futurebuilders England Ltd (FBE) on 19th February 2011 regular updates have been provided via the Members Information Service and reports to Hitchin Area Committee. Current issues include:

- Confirmation has been received from the Heritage Lottery Fund that a Stage 1 grant of £123,400 has been awarded following our application for a total grant of £953,900 for the fit out of the museum. This means that approximately £1.8m from a total budget of £4.23m has now been secured through external funding. Work is now underway to develop detailed proposals as part of the Stage 2 application process.
- Negotiations with Hitchin Town Hall Ltd on the Management Agreement and Lease have progressed and are now complete. Both documents are now being reviewed by FBE's legal representatives and we await final confirmation of their approval. Negotiations on the Development Agreement are substantially complete and are expected to conclude shortly. Once finally complete these will be despatched to FBE's legal representatives for their agreement.
- Although the Development Agreement has yet to be finally agreed, arrangements for the closure of both Letchworth and Hitchin Museums have been put in train to ensure this element of the project does not impede progress. Details of closure arrangements were circulated to Members shortly before Christmas but in summary provide for the partial closure (of one exhibition gallery for object processing) of Hitchin Museum from 14th July 2012, with full closure on 3rd September 2012. Part of the Art Gallery at Letchworth Museum is already in use for object processing, and that museum will also close on 3rd September 2012. These dates are provisional but nevertheless represent our current estimate of the closure periods. The reasons for the phased closure are:
 - That the collections currently exhibited or stored at both museums and Burymead need to be identified, catalogued and conserved in preparation for transfer to the new museum.
 - The financial pressure to avoid hiring temporary storage space to decant the collections to, and the point that eventually there must be a period in which all collections are prepared for transfer.
 - The exhibition fit-out designers will need information on the proposed objects, with dimensions and photographs, as soon as they are appointed.

- The limited expert staffing available within our museum service means that it will not be possible to continue to manage the museum service in the normal manner as the same time as undertaking the necessary preparatory works for the new museum. Staff cannot prepare exhibitions and events, and deal with enquiries, at the same time as identifying items for the new displays, and related cleaning and conservation. This is a point that has been continually stressed by other museums who have undergone similar transfers; most museums in this position close for considerably longer than is proposed here.

The transition plan makes provision for:

- Maintaining existing service at museums for as long as possible in the lead up to commencement of the project
 - The need for gradually increasing storage requirements for exhibits to be transferred
 - Opportunities for the public to have access to the identification and conservation work by way of casual visits and group tours (already in place at Letchworth from August 2011)
 - Continuing out reach work during the closure period
 - An improved web based presence to maintain access to elements of the collections
 - Opportunities during closure for researchers to access the most popular archive material from Hitchin Museum, which will be housed temporarily at the British Schools Museum
- Arrangements for Member briefing and Scrutiny sessions together with arrangements for stakeholders more generally are currently being planned and advance notice of these will be published as soon as possible.

Next Steps

- Officers will progress to conclude the Development Agreement with Hitchin Town Hall Ltd and submit this to Futurebuilders for approval and subsequently;
- Briefing sessions for all Members and Stakeholders will be arranged.
- Report to the Council and the Trust to consider the final agreement and to specifically seek authority to lease part of the Town Hall and Trust property to Hitchin Town Hall Ltd for a term of 125 years.

John Robinson
Strategic Director Customer Services

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