

SAFER & STRONGER COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 13 FEBRUARY 2012

OXFORDSHIRE MUSEUMS STRATEGY

1. Introduction

This paper provides an introduction to the draft Oxfordshire Museums Strategy drawn up by Oxford University Museums, Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council and Cherwell District Council.

2. Context and background

2.1 At its meeting in September the County Museums Officer explained to the Scrutiny Committee that a final draft of the Oxfordshire Museums Strategy would be made available to Scrutiny for comment following ratification by the directors of the University Museums. This having now been obtained the draft Strategy is presented for comment.

2.2 Oxfordshire is extraordinarily fortunate in the wealth of museums and collections within its boundaries. It boasts the first 'public' museum in Britain, The Ashmolean, collections of international importance at each of the four main Oxford University museums which between them care for c.7 million objects. The County Museums Service cares for collections of regional and local significance representing more than 10,000 years of Oxfordshire's history and is the official repository for the County's archaeology. Museums across the County also hold a number of important specialist collections, including material relating to the Great Western Railway, Morris Motors, William Morris and rowing.

2.3 Many of the smaller independent museums display material of local interest ranging from base ball memorabilia in Chipping Norton Museum to collections of local history in the former market towns of the County including Abingdon, Banbury, Thame, Wallingford, Wantage and Witney. In addition to which a number of smaller volunteer run museums in villages across the county play a key role in creating a sense of place and community in their locality.

2.4 The role of museums has changed significantly in the last 10–15 years. As well as collecting, preserving and sharing rich collections, they now play an increasing role in supporting the development of communities. They can be a place to help shape community identity and bring different community groups together. They can act as a catalyst for regeneration through the creation of new venues and civic spaces, and a resource for developing the skills and confidence of members of those communities.

2.5 Through visits and outreach museums engage with more than 80% of the state schools in Oxfordshire and 88% of schools in key areas of deprivation. Collectively museums engage with more than 200 community groups countywide providing a variety of opportunities for learning and enjoyment particularly for vulnerable adults.

2.6 Museums make a significant contribution to Oxfordshire's economy by welcoming more than 2.5 million visitors a year and attracting in excess of £80 million in capital investment in the past decade.

3. Collaborative working

3.1 With 40 museums across the county, there are a number of unifying arrangements and partnerships, notably between the County Council and Oxford University; between the County Museums Service and museums operated by local authorities in Abingdon, Banbury and Oxford; and the Oxfordshire Museums Council (OMC), which as a countywide network aims to work with and support all museums in the County. The Museum Development Service, working across Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, currently funded through Renaissance by MLA, is managed and hosted by the County Museum Service. Relationships with neighbouring local authorities and museum services are strong.

3.2 The Oxfordshire Museums Strategy (the Strategy) has been developed against the background of almost 50 years of collaboration and co-operative working between the University Museums and the County's Museum Service. Loans from University collections have featured in both permanent displays and temporary touring exhibitions exploring various aspects of Oxfordshire's past. By sharing curatorial expertise we have added to our knowledge and understanding of collections relating to the County and shared this information with increasingly broader audiences. Knowledge and skills sharing has also enabled the development of extensive, high quality education and access programmes.

3.3 The County Museums Service has a strong working relationship stretching back over almost 30 years with the local authority museums countywide providing loans for display, temporary touring exhibitions and expertise in collections care. Through the work of curatorial advisors and its support of the Oxfordshire Museums Council and the Museum Development Service it also provides support and advice to the wider museum community throughout the county and arranges loans as well as ongoing support and advice to many of the County's smaller volunteer run museums.

3.4 Oxford University Museums, a 'hub' museum, have been working with the Oxfordshire County Museums Service and Oxford City Council, with Renaissance funding, to reach target communities in the city. Building on that work, and in preparation for a bid to the Arts Council for Major Grant funding, in the Transition year 2011/12, the County Museums Service and University Museums have initiated a joint countywide project to increase access to collections – this particular project is focusing on 'Accessories' and drawing on collections from museums across the county. The project is seen as a pilot for future work.

The Strategy builds on all these partnerships.

4. The need for a Strategy

4.1 As the desire for, and the potential benefits of, partnership working across the county's museums has developed so has the need to articulate a single vision for all the collections in Oxfordshire - County, independent and University - which sets broad objectives for museum provision and development over the next five years. This will then form the basis upon which a detailed action plan can be devised and agreed by all to ensure that the county's museum resources continue to be central to the well-being of its communities.

4.2 The Strategy has been drawn up by Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council and Cherwell District Council and a draft was submitted as part of the successful ASPIRE consortium bid to the Arts Council for major grant funding.

5. Approach to Consultation

5.1 In shaping the Strategy officers have been keen to ensure the involvement of various stakeholders. Initial thoughts were shared with officers from the County's museums service, Oxford City Council, Cherwell District Council and senior staff from the University Museums and a representative from the Oxfordshire Museums Council

5.2 Following preparation of an agreed draft of the Strategy further consultation took place with members of the Museums Joint Working Group and subsequently with representatives of other key heritage providers including the Oxford Preservation Trust, the River and Rowing Museum (Henley), Blenheim Palace, Oxford Inspires, Oxford Brookes University and Modern Art Oxford, after which the final version of the Strategy was drafted for approval and ratification by the relevant governing bodies.

6. The Vision

The Strategy creates a vision

- for Oxfordshire to be recognised nationally and internationally as a place of museum excellence
- to ensure that the museums and collections are recognised as vital to the social well-being and economic development of Oxfordshire and the region
- to improve the sustainability of museums and collections
- to inspire visitors through the creative use of collections
- to actively engage school pupils, students and families
- to actively support and encourage research both internally and externally
- to maximise public access through effective marketing and outreach to reach the widest possible audiences
- to achieve excellence across the museum and heritage sector in Oxfordshire and beyond by encouraging a spirit of cooperation and collaboration.

7. Implementing the Strategy

7.1 It is not intended that the Strategy should dictate the direction of the county's museums, but it is hoped that it will form an overarching framework into which activity can fit and within which developments and projects can be presented to potential funders.

7.2 The Strategy advocates working with the local people to identify community priorities, building on the strengths of each partner and in discussion with stakeholders. It advocates a creative dialogue with partners from the wider heritage and arts sectors.

7.3 It will ensure that the greatest educational and cultural benefits are provided for the County's residents, the maximum economic impact of museums is achieved by supporting the local tourist economy, and that the partner and local authority strategic priorities are addressed.

7.4 It is envisaged that much can be achieved through more joint working to encourage the sharing of skills and knowledge, whilst the achievement of other goals will require additional external investment – hence the recently successful joint University and County Museums Service consortium bid to the Arts Council (under the title ASPIRE) for major grant funding.

8. ACE Major Grant Award

8.1 On 23rd January the Arts Council announced that the Oxford Aspire Consortium, had been selected as one of 16 recipients of a Renaissance Major Grant award. Those selected will together receive approximately £20 million a year in funding for the next three years as part of its Renaissance programme for regional museums.

8.2 Successful recipients of this funding will be expected to make a significant contribution to the delivery of the Arts Council's strategic goals as set out in *Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone* (Arts Council September 2011). Discussions are now taking place between the Consortium and the Arts Council to refine the programmes of work to be delivered and the funding available. We will keep Scrutiny informed of the outcome of these discussions

Action

Scrutiny is asked to comment on the attached Strategy and its future implementation.

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