

Oxfordshire Museums Service Strategic Forward Plan 2014/15 – 2017/18

1. Background

Oxfordshire County Council assumed responsibility for museums in 1974 under the powers of the Public Libraries and Museums Act, 1964. There is no statutory minimum service. However the Council has acquired museum collections over the last 40 years (and previously under a joint provision with the City Council) and these are held in trust for present and future generations. The Council has a responsibility to care for these collections which represent the material cultural heritage of the county.

As part of Oxfordshire County Council's response to reductions in central government funding in January and February 2011 decisions were made by the Cabinet and Council to reduce the budget of the Oxfordshire Museums Service by 38% over three years. In response to this and against the background of the need to respond to an anticipated reduction in income from the partner museums; the move of Cogges Manor Farm Museum to an independent trust, following consultation with staff and stakeholders, a phased restructuring was implemented concluding in March 2014.

The structure now in place aims to maintain the key assets of the Service and the broad, although reduced in depth, skills base to meet the needs of the County's collections and services to the public in addition to undertaking limited essential work for our partners on a cost recovery basis.

2. Review of the Forward Plan 2011 – 14

The 2011-14 forward plan focused on the day-to-day practicalities of keeping the service operating effectively without disruption or significant diminution of the quality of the services offered to the public. Resources and activity in this period concentrated upon delivering the savings required by devising and implementing a revised staffing structure and by reviewing all activities and targets. This has been achieved and the Service is now able to begin to implement its vision for the future provision of Museum services.

Through the Oxford Aspire Partnership with the University Museums, through the County Collections Project this period also saw the Museums Service continuing to provide value-added services whilst developing new approaches to access and interpretation. This included the production of a series of three films and the ground breaking use of touch screen cases in the *Unearthed* exhibition. During this time the Service undertook a series of successful, targeted community engagement projects, devised and delivered three exhibitions and undertook programmes to research and improve the care of collections, as well as increasing access to them through Heritage Search. The Service also continued to host and manage the Museums

Development Service for the region and the Portable Antiquities Scheme for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire and work with the Soldiers of Oxfordshire on the project to develop their new museum in the grounds of The Oxfordshire Museum at Woodstock.

The past three years have inevitably been inward looking and we now recognise that to implement its vision for the future the Service needs to focus attention back to engaging in greater consultation with users and stakeholders.

3. Current Service provision

The new structure fully implemented from April 2014 provides for

- Collection storage and care, also curatorial expertise based at the Museum Resources Centre, Standlake
- Access to collections focused on changing exhibitions and permanent displays at The Oxfordshire Museum, Woodstock. This supported by accessible collections storage at Swalcliffe Barn, also loans to partner and other museums across the County
- Learning and access opportunities at The Oxfordshire Museum, and countywide and through outreach programmes, supporting formal and informal learning in schools and at Castle Unlocked, Oxford and through community groups with a continuing emphasis upon reminiscence work with older people
- The management and delivery of enhanced services specialist services including the Portable Antiquities Scheme and the Museum Development Service for the region.

This plan sets the direction for the Oxfordshire Museums Service 2014 -18. It describes the aims and objectives set against the regional and national context of changes in local government funding and the funding and role of museums within their communities.

4. Our mission

The Oxfordshire Museums Service aims to inspire real meaning to belonging to Oxfordshire through the acquisition, care and creative use of the Museum collections, buildings and sites.

5. The Service provides

- 5.1** Safe storage at the Museums Resource Centre, Standlake in controlled, monitored conditions for the County's reserve collection of objects.

These consist of archaeological archives (for which it is the main County repository) from the Palaeolithic to the 17th century; social history material illustrating the lives of ordinary people in Oxfordshire over the last 400 years including men's, women's and children's dress from the 17th century to the 20th century in addition to individual items of national significance. The paintings, prints and drawings collection consists of work by Oxfordshire-based artists or depicting aspects of Oxfordshire includes work by well-known artists and also lesser-known individuals whose work is nonetheless of historical significance.

In recent years significant additions have been made to many areas of the collection by purchases supported by a number of trusts, foundations and grant giving bodies including the Art Fund; Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund; the Heritage Lottery Fund; the Headley Trust; the Aurelius Trust, and with significant support from the Friends of the Oxfordshire Museum, together with donations from the public.

Donations from members of the public make up the majority of the collection and the Museums Service provides an important social and cultural function in caring for this material.

5.2 Permanent displays at the Oxfordshire Museum, Woodstock tell the story of Oxfordshire, from the Dinosaurs to the Victorians, review changes in the countryside since 1945 and highlight innovations of national and international significance whose origins are to be found in the county. Galleries include archaeology, social and some natural history material, in addition to paintings. The Museum also provides temporary exhibitions of material from the reserve collections and hosts touring exhibitions which vary and enhance the existing offer. The Museum supports and nurtures the work of artists and craftspeople within the county by supporting exhibitions of the work by groups, many of whose members' work is of regional or national significance, as well as the work by young and emerging talents.

In 2013-14 the Museum welcomed in the region of 129,000 visitors and delivered curriculum enrichment sessions to 1,400 school children. Some 1,500 children and their families took part in informal educational activities and 1,400 adults attended lectures, workshops and reminiscence sessions delivered by the Museum.

5.3 Swalcliffe Barn, one of the finest medieval tithe barns in the country, in the northwest of the county, provides accessible storage for agricultural and trade vehicles and houses a temporary exhibition on aspects of the history of the parish created by the Swalcliffe Society, whose members open the barn to the public on Sunday afternoons between Easter and the end of October and

additionally during Oxfordshire Art Weeks in May. Annually visitors number in the region of 800/1000.

5.4 The Museums Service also lends items from the reserve collection to other museums and organisations. Currently regular and substantial loans are made to: Abingdon Museum, Banbury Museum, Cogges, the Museum of Oxford, the Vale & Downland Museum, Wantage and on a significant, but lesser scale to local independent museums including the River & Rowing Museum, Henley and to museums in Thame, Charlbury and Wallingford in addition to short term loans to other museums and organisations.

5.5 The collections team also provides support, on a cost recovery basis, to our partner museums to enable them to adequately maintain and document the collections in their care, but more especially those items which are on loan from the County's collections. Support and advice is also provided to museums in Oxfordshire and across the wider region on request.

5.6 The Museums Service has a strong temporary exhibitions programme, both on site at The Oxfordshire Museum, where it makes a significant contribution to audience development, and through the provision of small touring exhibitions.

5.7 The Service makes the collections in its care accessible to the widest possible audience through searchable on-line databases, principally Heritage Search, the catalogue of Oxfordshire's cultural and heritage resources. This can be used to search a wide range of materials, including museum, archive and local studies collections, relating to Oxfordshire's past, with reference and contact information associated with each item. Partner organisations for the Heritage Search include the Oxfordshire History Centre, Oxfordshire Historic Environment Record, Vale and Downland Museum, Pendon Museum, and the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Trust. Additionally specialist collections are available on line including the Witney Blanket collection www.witneyblanketstory.org.uk; social history items from Oxfordshire on <http://england.prm.ox.ac.uk/> ; and paintings in oil and acrylics on the BBC's Your Paintings website www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings

5.8 The Service also offers an enquiry and object identification service, although much of the work previously undertaken in respect of archaeological finds from across the County is now undertaken by the Portable Antiquities Scheme funded Finds Liaison Officer. Research enquiries are usually handled at the Museums Resource Centre, where researchers are able to access reserve collections and receive specialist support in researching their enquiry.

Approximately 700 enquiries relating specifically to our collections are answered each year, together with a further 298 individuals (2013/14) reporting archaeological objects to the Finds Liaison Officer.

In addition the Service responds to innumerable ad hoc, often face to face enquiries and requests for information about all aspects of the County's history and culture principally at The Oxfordshire Museum and on Open Days at the Museums Resource Centre.

5.9 The Museum Service's Learning & Access team, with input from staff and volunteers from across the service, and the Friends of the Oxfordshire Museum, offer a comprehensive range of engagement programmes including workshops for schools at the Museum and in schools; family learning activities and events at the Museum; Museum trails, back packs and gallery activities; object loan boxes are made available to schools, community groups and partner museums; reminiscence workshops and events in communities across the county; a regular reminiscence group for older people at the Museum; lecture programmes at the Museum and occasional outreach in the community or presentations to specialist audiences and at particular events. A member of the Learning & Access team develops and delivers a schools programme at Castle Unlocked in Oxford, through a 0.5 fte post, and trains members of the Castle's staff to deliver additional sessions to schools.

5.10 The Museum Service also supports and manages, on behalf of the Aspire partnership, the work of the Museum Development Service for the Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire as part of the Southeast Consortium led by Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove. Funding from the Arts Council enables this service to provide support museums across the region to achieve the ACE five goals for the sector.

5.11 The Museum Service hosts the Portable Antiquities Scheme, a DCMS funded project to encourage the voluntary recording of archaeological objects found by members of the public, and manages the work of the Finds Liaison Officer for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

6. What do people want from their Museums Service?

Although the use of online databases to access collections is increasing, the majority of our users access our services in person by visiting the Oxfordshire Museum, the Museums Resource Centre and Swalcliffe Barn, or receive a service delivered directly to them in their school or community by our learning and access team.

For the majority of people a visit to the museum or the use of an online facility is a leisure activity. To be successful in either context we must ensure that our

visitors want to visit, know how to find us, feel welcome when they arrive, are engaged during their stay, and leave feeling eager to return.

The overwhelming positive response to evaluation forms received on Open Days at the Museums Resource Centre, and from participants in facilitated sessions delivered by the Learning and Access team to schools and community groups, indicates a high level of user satisfaction with the services they receive in excess of 90% in all areas. The only negative comments being centred round a demand for more.

In the absence of recent targeted evaluation surveys of visitors to The Oxfordshire Museum, a matter to be addressed in the future and detailed in the Museum Service's Audience Development Plan, analysis of the visitor comments and the data from the CRT survey kiosk at The Oxfordshire Museum, combined with research findings nationally, show that to enjoy a successful visit our museum users expect

- good pre-visit information both printed and on-line
- clear and sufficient signage
- a variety of opportunities for activity and engagement to suit a variety of ages and learning styles
- high quality permanent displays that make appropriate use of new technology
- changing exhibitions providing the opportunity to access the reserve collections and providing a reason to return
- accessible premises and services; welcoming staff; well-maintained exhibits, gallery inter-actives, premises and toilets
- a shop and a reasonably priced café

The priority given to each element varying in accordance with the needs, interests and demographics of the individual

The limited sample provided by the CRT survey kiosk at The Oxfordshire Museum (January-December 2013) indicates that the majority of respondents believe that we achieve these aims to an acceptable standard in those areas we currently measure:

- Overall visitor rating 93% satisfaction of which 86% good or excellent
- Staff welcome and service 91% satisfaction of which 84% good or excellent
- External signage 90% satisfaction of which 78% good or excellent
- Internal signage 92% satisfaction of which 82% good or excellent
- Educational activities 84% satisfaction of which 77% good or excellent
- Temporary exhibitions 89% satisfaction of which 15% exceeded expectations

- Shop 81% satisfaction of which 72% good or excellent
- Café 71% satisfaction of which 64% good or excellent
- Toilets 74% satisfaction of which 64% good or excellent

When asked what was the best part of their visit opinions varied considerably and future evaluation will seek to hone these responses and those received via gallery comments cards to more effectively inform future activities. The popularity of dinosaurs emerges clearly, as does people's general enjoyment of the exhibits and the garden, the welcome provided by the staff also makes a significant contribution to providing an enjoyable visit.

When asked what could be done to make their visit excellent, views varied: provide more exhibitions and events; improved toilet facilities would certainly make a difference to some visitors, as would a larger café and shop with lower prices (perhaps the aspiration of a bargain hunting culture); more working interactive exhibits and things to do were clearly important to younger visitors; visitors also expressed dissatisfaction with non-working exhibits; low light levels (not always intentionally so); need for better building maintenance etc.

7. Vision for the Oxfordshire Museums Service

Our vision is that the Oxfordshire Museums Service will provide an exceptional service that is accessible, relevant to, and used by everyone who lives, works, visits and studies in Oxfordshire. Our services will be valued by local people and provide benefits to individuals and communities.

The services provided by Oxfordshire's Museums Service will inspire creativity and imagination, and encourage a sense of belonging. They will contribute to supporting and promoting strong communities; improving people's health and well-being; raising educational attainment, especially in children of primary school age (we currently provide curriculum enrichment to almost 9,500 Oxfordshire school children predominantly of primary school age), and attracting tourists (currently 49% of the 129,000 visitors to The Oxfordshire Museum come from outside the County: source CRT Kiosk responses 2013).

We will embrace the Museums Association vision for the increased social impact of Museums, as expressed in *Museums Change Lives* (Museums Association 2013) and play an active part in improving people's lives (we currently provide services to 4,500 predominantly older people across the county); creating better places and helping to advance society, whilst building on our traditional role of preserving collections and connecting audiences with them.

The key objectives for the Museums Service are to:

- Encourage the widest possible engagement with, learning from and enjoyment of the county's collections both in store and on display
- Continue to deliver and develop a high quality visitor service at The Oxfordshire Museum
- Continue to deliver a tailored programme of engagement activities for families; school children and older people both at The Oxfordshire Museum and in communities across the county
- Enable groups and individuals to engage with the collections in their communities
- Seek to use new technology to engage new audiences and enhance interpretation
- Care for the collections to preserve them for the understanding and enjoyment of present and future generations
- Improve the quality and depth of the county's collections from all periods
- Increase online access to collections and enhance their interpretation
- Through implementation of the Museum's Audience Development plan we will broaden our user profile to more closely reflect that of the county as a whole

By 2018 the Service will be recognised as providing a significant contribution to Oxfordshire County Council's corporate goal of a Thriving Oxfordshire.

It will be sustainable and relevant and valued by the communities it serves. It will be delivering Arts Council's England's Vision for Museums as expressed in *Great Art and Culture for Everyone* (Arts Council England 2013) by ensuring that

- We strive for excellence in everything we do
- Everyone has an opportunity to experience and be inspired by our collections
- The service is resilient and environmentally sustainable
- Our staff are diverse and appropriately skilled
- Every child and young person in Oxfordshire has the opportunity to experience the richness of our collections

we will ensure that the service thrives and engages with and inspires as many people as possible and that their lives are changed by these engagements.

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8. How we will deliver our services

We will work with six organisational values in mind when putting into practice the actions required in delivering the vision. These are

- **Customer Focus:** We will treat our customers as we would want to be treated; see things through their eyes and where possible enable them to do more for themselves.
- **Honesty:** we will be open and transparent about our work. Operate with integrity showing an openness to learn from feedback and recognise where we need to change, improve or stop doing things.
- **One team:** we will focus on the outcome to be achieved, take ownership of our responsibilities and work with colleagues across the council and beyond to deliver.
- **Innovation:** we will challenge the way things have always been done, take appropriate risks and look for opportunities to work differently to improve services.
- **Commercial:** we will be as careful with the council's money as we would our own. Make the most of opportunities to improve the quality of services by getting real value from internal and external relationships, and securing the best outcome.
- **Enthusiasm;** we will bring energy and commitment to our work, be proactive and open to change and look for opportunities to contribute to service improvement and organisational goals.

The Museum Service will

- deliver services within budget and make the best use of resources to ensure that its services are relevant and delivered to an appropriate standard.
- regularly review existing, and seek new opportunities, to generate income to mitigate and manage the impact of reductions in our core funding and deliver the new and enhanced services expected of us by our users.
- continue to work in partnership with other museum providers and related organisations to achieve best value and maximise opportunities to extend the reach and quality of the services we provide
- continue to encourage volunteering in all areas of the service to support, deliver and extend our current offer

- continue to work with services across the region to ensure that we benefit from best practice and opportunities to review and develop our services and to share our knowledge and experiences to support the wider museum network in Oxfordshire and the wider region
- implement Oxfordshire County Council's environmental sustainability policy and seek to reduce our carbon footprint and encourage our users to do likewise
- invest in the training of our staff and volunteers to ensure that they maintain their existing skills whilst developing the new skills and experiences as required to deliver the Service's vision and enable individuals to make the most of their skills and interests to achieve their aspirations.

9. Delivering the vision

The vision outlined above will be delivered by our annual action plans detailing service activity and will be responsive to changes in thinking and funding at regional and national level. We will actively seek on-going user feedback, evaluate responses and act upon them.

10. How will we know we are making progress in delivering the Vision?

Through the monitoring and evaluation of both qualitative and quantitative data including:

- increase in visitor numbers at The Oxfordshire Museum as per targets identified in the Audience Development Plan
- budget out turn – increase in earned and contributed income
- existing partnerships are maintained and new ones created
- the number of volunteer hours contributed to the service
- increase in availability and use of on-line collections databases
- shift in user profile to more closely reflect the County's population in demographics and distribution
- results of structured evaluation of our services by users as individuals and communities
- results of informal self-evaluation by our users
- measured improvement in our carbon footprint and through increased virtual access and increased use of public transport to access our services
- staff and volunteers receive timely and appropriate training and support

Supporting documents

Oxfordshire County Council: A Thriving Oxfordshire: Corporate Plan 2013/14 – 2017/18

<http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/sites/default/files/folders/documents/aboutyourcouncil/localgovernment/corporateplan.pdf>

Arts Council England: Great Art and Culture for Everyone 2013

http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/Great_art_and_culture_for_everyone.pdf

Museums Association Museums Change Lives 2013

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives/25062013-the-vision>

Oxfordshire Museums Strategy 2012

<http://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=14741&ISATT=1#search=%22Museums%20Strategy%22>

Oxfordshire Insight <http://insight.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms>

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