Oxfordshire Museums Strategy
A vision for our collections

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1.0 Background

The role of museums has changed over time and never more so than in the last 10–15 years. As well as their traditional role of collecting, preserving and sharing rich collections, museums now find that they play an increasing role in supporting the development of communities. Museums can be a place to help shape community identity and bring different community groups together, 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. (Museums Association, 2011)

The purpose of the Oxfordshire Museums Strategy is to create a vision for museums in Oxfordshire which will:

- Ensure that the museum resources of Oxfordshire are recognised as central to the well-being of the county's communities

- Set broad objectives for museum provision and development over the next five years upon which a detailed action plan can be based

The Strategy has been drawn up by Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council, Cherwell District Council and Oxford University, and is intended to reinforce the value of greater partnership working and cooperation. The strategy must also reflect the intentions of others working in the museums/heritage sector, including other local authorities, independent museums and other organisations (eg the National Trust). The success of the strategy will depend heavily on the degree to which all are willing and able to play their part in its achievement.

Consultation

Following preparation of an agreed draft of the Strategy there will be a process of dissemination and consultation across the museum sector and before the Strategy is taken to governing bodies for approval and ratification.

Oxfordshire's Museums

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 (all designated), significant 'county' and local collections and a number of important specialist collections – including the Great Western Railway material at Didcot, the Morris Motors Collection at the Bus Museum and Nuffield Place, and the rowing collections at Henley. Many of the smaller independent museums hold significant collections of local and regional interest such as the baseball memorabilia in Chipping Norton Museum. There are also notable collections in private houses open to the public and in properties owned by the National Trust.

With more than 40 museums across the county, there are a number of unifying arrangements and partnerships, notably between the County Council and Oxford University (the Museums Partnership) – particularly relating to the 'core' bid; between the County Museums Service and a number of local museums (previously part of the County service) and overseen by the Museums Joint Working Group, and the Oxfordshire Museums Council (OMC), which as a countywide network aims to work with and support all museums across Oxfordshire. The Museum Development Service, working across Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, currently funded through Renaissance by MLA, is hosted by the County Council, on behalf of the partnership between the County and Oxford University. Relationships with neighbouring local authorities and museum services are strong.

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 the bid for 'core' status, 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 focusing on 'Accessories' and drawing on collections from all museums. The project is seen as a pilot for future work. This Strategy builds on all those partnerships.

The importance and benefits of museums:

- The museum resources of Oxfordshire are of international, national and local significance – ensuring their preservation is a responsibility of this generation for future generations
- Oxfordshire's museums attract more than 2.5 million tourists and visitors annually making a significant contribution to the local economy
- The museum collections inspire creativity and learning, they provide a sense of place and engender a sense of belonging and pride in our localities and culture
- The collections generate respect for histories and cultures different from our own
- Understanding our past helps to inform the present and future
- Museum resources are a vital stimulus for building useful knowledge and skills.

2.0 The Vision

Our vision is:
- 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.

3.0 Implementation

This 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. 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 the partner and Local Authority strategic priorities are addressed.

4.0 Recommendations

4.1 Investment in collections and knowledge:

- Oxfordshire Museums will create a centre of excellence, building on the strengths listed above, the partnerships and diversity across the county. Such a world-class aspiration can be achieved through strengthening the partnerships and continuous investment.
- The success of our aspiration to release the full potential of our collections is dependent on the knowledge and research linked to those collections. Investment in staff, training, skill sharing and research opportunities is essential.

4.2 Investment in inspiration and learning:

Oxfordshire Museums will deliver or facilitate:
- higher achievement in education – cooperation towards maintaining and developing learning opportunities for schools is essential
- Adult learning, both formal and informal,
- Reminiscence and well-being work with older people
- Services to groups of people traditionally excluded from museums
- Support for significant loans from partner (and other) museums.

4.3 Improvements to access:

Access to the collections will be improved through:
- integrating access to databases across the county's collections
- increasing the quantity of collections stored in a digital format to be available online
- prioritising the display of stored collections
- actively seeking opportunities to include collection display in planned building development.

4.4 Improvements to collections care:

Oxfordshire Museums will strengthen the care and co-ordination of collecting across museums through:
- review of collections countywide to identify the nature and location of the county's portable heritage
- improved co-ordination of the county's archaeological archive and care of the collections as a county wide resource.

4.5 Creation of a Collections Trust:

Oxfordshire Museums will develop a collections purchase trust for Oxfordshire, with the intention of assisting the acquisition of objects for Oxfordshire's museums.

5.0 Actions
Oxfordshire's museums will

5.1 develop a collections purchase trust for Oxfordshire, with the intention of assisting the acquisition of objects for Oxfordshire's museums

5.2 share knowledge and skills by building on the Accessories Project and encouraging specialist curators to share their collections knowledge

5.3 maintain and further develop the excellent learning opportunities offered by museums across the County

5.4 actively co-ordinate their educational offer to schools and families

5.5 continue to improve electronic access to collections and seek a means of creating a single portal for access to all Oxfordshire collections

5.6 seek to maintain appropriate opening hours allowing access to displayed and stored collections

5.7 encourage and promote the sharing of collections between museums

5.8 review collections countywide to identify the nature and location of the county's portable heritage

5.9 improve coordination of the county's archaeological archive and care of the collections as a county wide resource

5.10 share conservation expertise to ensure that all collections in the county are appropriately cared for.

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APPENDIX ONE

The county's museums, their collections and the services they offer make a significant contribution to achieving the corporate priorities of Oxfordshire's local authorities by

- contributing to the cultural and economic development of Oxford and its region

- raising educational achievement

- improving services and providing opportunities for young people

- reducing the number of young people not in employment, education or training, and improving their skills

- encouraging community self-help and engagement with our communities

- responding to the changing needs of an ageing population

- exploiting the capacity of the museums and their collections to draw in non-traditional audiences

Existing Partnerships and Organisations

There are a number of existing examples of exemplary cooperation as outlined below.

Over the last year, *Oxford University Museums and the County Museums Service* have worked together to support the City Council's Museum of Oxford, particularly through outreach programmes to some of the city's target communities. This work has helped to demonstrate the value of heritage to marginalised communities and community leaders.

The Oxfordshire Museums Council was established more than 30 years ago and formed a model for countywide consultative committees. The Council includes all museums, some 40 in total, publishes an annual publicity leaflet, and organises training and support for the sector.

The County Museums Service works closely with the other local authority supported museums – providing centralised storage and collection care, technical and exhibition services on a cost recovery basis – overseen by a *Museums Joint Working Group* with representatives from all the local authorities in the County, the University and the Oxfordshire Museums Council.

The County Museums Service also works with *Oxford Preservation Trust* supporting community and educational work at Oxford Castle.

The Thames Valley Museums Group (TVMG) was established in 2003 to link museums across the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire (BOB) sub region.

The Oxford City and County Archaeological Forum (OCCAF) provides advice and expertise in support of those who are responsible for the care of the County's archaeological heritage and includes representatives from the City, County and University, English Heritage and the Oxford Archaeological and Historical Society

The Portable Antiquities Scheme provides funding in support of a Finds Liaison Officer for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire whose prime task is to record archaeological objects found by members of the public. Every year many hundreds of objects are discovered, many of these by metal-detector users. Such discoveries offer an important source for understanding the County's past. The implementation of the scheme is overseen by a joint committee comprising officers from both authorities and draws specialist support from the University and staff at Oxford Archaeology.

APPENDIX THREE

<u>Museums in Oxfordshire</u>

Abingdon Museum
The Ashmolean Museum
Bampton Community Archive
Banbury Museum
Bate Collection of Musical instruments
Bloxham Village Museum
Champs Chapel Museum
Charlbury Museum
Chipping Norton Museum
Christchurch Picture Gallery
Churchill and Sarsden Heritage Centre
Combe Mill
Didcot Railway Centre
Dorchester Abbey Museum
Hook Norton Brewery Museum
Hook Norton Village Museum
Museum of the History of Science
Museum of Oxford
Northmoor Trust – project timescape
Oxford University Press Museum
Oxford Botanic Gardens
Oxford Bus Museum and Morris Motors
Oxford Castle Unlocked
Oxford University Museum of Natural History
Oxfordshire Museums Resource Centre
Oxfordshire Museum
Pendon Museum
Pitt Rivers Museum
River and Rowing Museum
Soldiers of Oxfordshire Research Centre
Swalcliffe Barn
Swinford Museum
Thame Museum
Tolsey Museum
Tom Brown's School Museum
Vale and Downland Museum
Wallingford Museum
Waterperry Rural Museum
Witney and District Museum

<u>Historic houses with significant museum collections</u>

Blenheim Palace (Trust)
Chastleton (National Trust)
Kelmscott Manor (Society of Antiquaries)
Nuffield Place (National Trust)