

Report to Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee

4 July 2011

Oxfordshire Museums Service

1. 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 35 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.

Key outcomes of the Oxfordshire Museums Service (2010/11)

| | Target | Actual |
|---|---------|---------|
| Number of visits to The Oxfordshire Museum (TOM) | 170,000 | 167,641 |
| Web site visits | 70,000 | 94,790 |
| Learning & Access (adults) | 3,400 | 3,687 |
| Learning & Access (children) | 2,400 | 2,101 |
| School visits TOM | 2,000 | 2,232 |
| Volunteer hours | 2,600 | 4,269 |

2. Following the decisions of the Cabinet and Council in January and February to reduce the budget of the Oxfordshire Museums Service by 40% over the following three years, managers have prepared plans to meet this reduction and currently those proposals are in a process of formal consultation with the staff. The gross budget of the OMS for 2011/12 is £1,144,000; the income target is £198,000. The net budget is therefore £946,000. £160,000 is included in that figure as a grant to the Cogges Trust, leaving £786,000 for the museum service. The budget reduction agreed by the Council is £200,000 in 2012, and £100,000 in 2013 (38% in total).

3. At the same time, the service is having to respond to an anticipated reduction in income from partner museums (Museum of Oxford, Abingdon Museum, Banbury Museum, Vale and Downland Museum), and to the changes at Cogges.

4. The museum service budget comprises salaries and staffing costs(83%), supplies and services (8%) and premises costs (8%). There is no opportunity to reduce the premises costs; the supplies and services budgets are already very low, so there is no choice other than to cut staffing. In order to meet the reductions, the service is planning to reduce staffing from 30 fte to 15 fte over the period.

5. A new structure has been developed which aims to maintain the assets of the service and the broad skills base the service currently enjoys and needs in order to undertake work for our partners as well as meeting the needs of the County's collections and service. Broadly the new structure proposes three sections:

- Public services and access to collections focused at the Oxfordshire Museum, Woodstock
- Curatorial and collection services at the Museum Resources Centre, Standlake
- Learning and access, countywide

6. In addition it is proposed to support a 'business unit' through 2012 which will offer specialist conservation, collection care and technical support services to partner museums (and other organizations).

7. Given the reduction in staffing, and in order to maintain services, all sections will become increasingly dependent on the support of volunteers. It is proposed to appoint a 'Volunteers Coordinator' to manage the recruitment of volunteers. The post will also manage the 'front of house' staff at The Oxfordshire Museum.

8. The formal consultations with staff are planned to continue until 14 July; Staff Support, Unison and Human Resources are involved in the process which aims to consult all staff on the plans and to ensure appropriate and fair procedures, in accordance with Council policies, for the implementation of the plans. It is planned to implement the new structure in two phases from April 2012.

The Oxfordshire Museum

9. The Oxfordshire Museum (TOM) was established in Woodstock in 1964 as the County Museum. It is housed in a fine 17th/18th century town house in the heart of the town. In recent years it has been refurbished and redisplayed, with awards of over £2.5 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund and support from other grant aid organizations and from the community (through the Friends organization). A capital contribution from OCC over the last three years of £150,000 has enabled the redisplay of two further galleries and improvements to retail and visitor services across the site. TOM currently attracts c 170,000 visitors per year.

10. The staffing reductions will reduce front of house staff, curatorial and support staff. The service is working with the Friends of TOM to seek volunteers to help staff the galleries and museum reception, and to undertake support tasks.

11. Following a report to the Cabinet in June, it is anticipated that a lease and management arrangements will be confirmed enabling work to start on the construction of a new building within the TOM site to house the Soldiers of Oxfordshire (SOFO) collections and exhibit them. This new development is

funded entirely by SOFO. The SOFO museum aims to illustrate the impact of conflict on the people and places of Oxfordshire.

12. Work is due to start on site in July 2011 with the demolition of the current Pratten building in advance of construction work starting in the autumn. Completion is planned for 2013/14.

13. In the meantime SOFO has been successful in obtaining a grant of £50,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund to support a new temporary exhibition due to open at TOM in the autumn on the theme *Children and War*. This to be supported by an extensive outreach programme involving schools and the wider community delivered in partnership with the County service and others.

Curatorial and collection services at the Museum Resources Centre

14. The Museum Resources Centre (MRC) at Standlake houses the County Council's museum collections of archaeology, history and art from Oxfordshire. This resource is used by TOM and the partner museums for exhibitions, learning and outreach. In 2010/11 an extension to the building, funded by Oxfordshire Council with additional contributions from 106 agreements, was completed to increase storage capacity, improve collection care (particularly for the textile collections) and to provide more space for volunteers and researchers using the collection.

15. Curatorial, conservation, documentation and technical staff are based at MRC; from 2012 that staffing will be reduced to part-time curators for archaeology and social history; part-time documentation and conservation staff. Opportunities to improve access to collections and to enhance collection care and documentation will be limited.

16. A significant number of volunteers already support work at MRC – assisting with documentation and collection care. That support will be encouraged and more volunteers recruited to support the work of the remaining staff.

Learning and Access

17. The Learning and Access team provide a range of learning opportunities at TOM – formal learning for schools, family 'drop-in' sessions, workshops and lectures for adult audiences; they also take collections out to schools and to adult groups (day care and residential homes and other community groups). This work is highly valued by the recipients and has attracted wide support from Adult Social Care (particularly for reminiscence and creative work with adults) and Children, Education and Families (for work with primary schools).

18. The reduction in staffing will reduce the level of service that can be provided – with less visits to schools and groups of older people.

The Business Unit

19. In the current year the museum service anticipates an income of £53,000 from partner museums. The museum service provides specialist conservation and collection care for these museums, documents the collections, and manages a programme of changing exhibitions. These services are charged to the partner museums 'at cost'. However, the future potential for income generation is uncertain; other local authorities and individual museums are facing their own similar budget pressures, so the opportunities for externally funded work are reducing.

20. The Business Unit allows some capacity and a broader range of skills to be maintained through 2012 for work for the partner museums (and others). If the unit is successful and can generate sufficient income, it will be retained; but if it proves unable to generate income, then it will be closed down. The unit will be monitored closely over the next 9 months in order to assess its likely future.

Cogges

21. Previously part of the museum service, Cogges is about to be transferred to a new independent charitable Trust. The Trust hopes to sign a 30 year lease on the site before the end of June; a new Director, funded and managed by the Trust, has been appointed, and the Trust aims to reopen the site in July.

22. The new Trust plans to relaunch Cogges with the themes of 'food' and 'sustainability'. The historic room settings in the ground floor of the Manor House will be retained; elsewhere the Trust is planning to introduce a resident 'smallholder', to provide catering and retailing, and to offer a programme of creative activities for schools and community groups. A very successful Volunteers Day was run on 14th May attended by over 100 people who were briefed as to the new Trust's vision for the future development of Cogges and the role to be played by volunteers. A recruitment process for volunteers is now underway.

Issues for the future

- a. Capacity: the loss of staff reduces the capacity of the service overall. This will impact on the ability of the service to continue to work successfully in partnerships (currently the museums service works closely with the Oxfordshire Museums Council and others supporting museums countywide). It will also reduce the service's ability to apply for external funding.
- b. Loss of expertise and skills: the reduction in staffing will reduce the breadth of specialist skills available to the service (and to partner museums); if the Business Unit is not able to sustain itself and is closed, then this will exacerbate the issue.
- c. Uncertainty of income: in addition to the uncertainty over future income for the Business Unit, other income from retailing, catering, commission on

sales, room hire at TOM is also less secure in the current economic climate.

- d. Increasing reliance on volunteers: the service has welcomed the support of volunteers for many years – adding value to core work and undertaking very valuable support roles; however in the proposed new structure the service will become increasingly reliant on volunteers. The involvement of more volunteers across a range of activities will increase demands on management.
- e. Oxfordshire Heritage Partnership: the Oxfordshire Museums Service is working in partnership with Oxford University Museums in order to bid to become a ‘core’ museum with the opportunity of attracting significant external funding (from the Museums Libraries and Archives/Arts Council) for increasing access to the museum collections. Criteria for the selection of ‘core’ museums are due to be published in July with the outcome of applications announced before Christmas. A pilot project, funded by MLA, has already begun – drawing on collections from across the county. A draft Heritage Strategy for Oxfordshire has been written, in preparation for the bid, and the first consultation meeting for this will be held on 21 June.
- f. Change in governance: during 2010/11, an external consultant was engaged by the museum service, funded by the MLA, to advise on possible changes to the governance structure (a number of museums around the country have been encouraged to undertake this work). The consultant advised that in view of the current development with SOFO and the changes already being considered for the museum service, no change to governance should be planned at present, but that a future change, possibly to an independent Trust might be considered in due course.

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