

Response to e-petition: Saving Oxfordshire History

The e-petition sets out the following:

“We the undersigned petition the council to ensure that sufficient staff are retained to maintain the combined Oxfordshire Studies and Oxfordshire Record Office services in future and that the services are adequately funded.

We very much fear that the cuts in personnel currently proposed-including a loss of eight posts-will disastrously affect public access to collections and put collections at risk. The services concerned have been squeezed for decades now. The total spent on them is 0.76 per cent of the county's annual £973m budget. The cuts now proposed come close to execution. Everyone in the county will be losers if we are no longer able to research our past and thus better understand our present and future.”

Response of the Director for Social & Community Services

We face a very difficult financial position. However, I believe that the proposals do ensure that sufficient staff are retained to provide the combined services so people will be able to continue to research the past. The rest of this response explains why that is my view

Rationale

The History Services (Oxfordshire Record Office and Oxfordshire Studies) were asked in 2010/11 to look at finding 40% savings over the next four years. This decision took place in the context of the County Council needing to find savings of approximately £200m by 2014/15 (approximately 40% of its budget).

The History Services are staff intensive (85% of the funding is dedicated to salaries) and have certain fixed costs for premises and services.

A decision was made to reduce the fixed costs by uniting the services on one site; this decision was made following earlier consultation with representatives of user groups which indicated general support for the idea of an integrated History Centre.

Remaining savings are being made from the staffing budget, over the period, to allow for retirements and other staff movements – to minimize, as far as possible, compulsory redundancies. Overall staffing numbers will reduce from 21 in 2010/11 to 11 by 2014.

Benefits

- Westgate Central Library is not a suitable building for storing valuable historical resources. The History Centre will store all the resources of the former Oxfordshire Studies in state-of-the-art BS5454 conditions.
- Maintaining security and securing the resources of Oxfordshire Studies has been difficult, and stock could easily be damaged or stolen. In the History Centre there will be far tighter security and more direct oversight of all users.
- Historical researchers often remain working in the building for several hours at a stretch. The History Centre provides a café and toilets to facilitate this. Similar facilities are not available in Westgate Central Library.
- With all staff on one site, it is possible to open the public reading and research room for 5 days (39 hours) a week; previously both Oxfordshire Studies and Oxfordshire Record Office could only open for 4 days (32 hours) each.
- Any serious researcher has always needed resources from both Oxfordshire Record Office and Oxfordshire Studies and has had to move back and forth between buildings three miles apart. Now all the resources are in a single building.
- A significant range of duplicate resources remains on the top floor of the Central Library, which is now open during the full Library opening hours rather than the limited Oxfordshire Studies hours.

There are some issues which we shall monitor carefully

- The St Luke's building has space for approximately eight years' expansion. There is limited opportunity on the site to enlarge the building. Plans for an outstore, or replacement building need to be considered. This will be considered as part of the County Council's capital planning processes.
- There is limited space available for researchers, however there will be seating for 44 people who will be encouraged to book and reserve a seat to avoid being turned away if the History Centre is full. This situation will be monitored closely.
- Office space has been reduced – this will affect the working conditions of staff and limit the potential for volunteer involvement.
- The History Centre is three miles from the centre of Oxford. This is useful for people who drive to it, but possibly less so for those using public transport (although there is a very good bus service from the City Centre).
- Staffing levels of the service were already among the lowest in the country, and now will be significantly lower. In practice the staffing cuts mean:
 - There will be minimal processing of the uncatalogued collections, which will therefore continue to be unavailable to the public.

- There is no spare capacity for outreach or partnership working.
- There is no capacity to provide more than a basic core service; new projects, fundraising, meeting new challenges, etc
- The operational budget is now very low leaving no room to manoeuvre if, for example, energy costs rise. New challenges, such as the preservation of digital and electronic archives, cannot be tackled.

Conclusion

The creation of the History Centre has been driven by an economic situation; it is a solution to the problem that it will simply no longer be possible to fund the services as they stand, or anything like them, in the future. Within those constraints, the History Centre protects many of the core needs of the services and even provides improvements: the existing collections are protected and access to them is more joined-up and for longer hours. It must be remembered that this is taking place in an environment where public services once believed inviolable are being closed down completely; from the user perspective the History Services are being largely secured or even improved.