

Minutes of the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Joint Archives Committee meeting held on 25 February 2021

Present: Mike Davies (Invitee/Observer), Gill Burnett, Lorraine Beardmore and Victoria Wilson

PART ONE

11. Declarations of Interest in accordance with Standing Order 16

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

12. Minutes of meeting held on 12 November 2020

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2020 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

13. Review of Forward Plan 2021

The Committee considered a joint report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Families and Communities (Staffordshire County Council) and Director of Housing and Community Services (Stoke-on-Trent City Council) informing them of the outcome of the 2021 review of the Service's Forward Plan "Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Archive and Heritage Service Vision" (Schedule 1 to the signed minutes). A copy of the proposed revised Forward Plan was appended to the report for Members' information.

The Forward Plan 2015 – 2025 had been approved by the Committee at their meeting on 26 March 2015. Whilst the Archive service had previously worked to a three year planning cycle, the scope of the current plan had been extended to cover ten years having regard to the time needed to deliver some of the changes required and its role in achieving the transformation of the service. However, following a review undertaken at their meeting on 3 April 2018 the Plan was revised to include:- (i) updated context headlines; (ii) an updated list of Partners; (ii) an additional section on the project vision, aims and objectives for the Staffordshire History Centre (SHC) and; (iv) information on collections, buildings, outreach, volunteers, partnerships and resources.

Members learned that a further review of the Plan had recently been undertaken resulting in the following proposed changes:-

- **Background, Partners and Context Headlines** – expand the list of key partners to include:- Staffordshire, Liverpool and Nottingham Universities; (ii) Stafford College (to reflect planned activity in respect of the Staffordshire History Centre Project (SHCP)); (iii) various ceramic collector groups (to reflect their help in the conservation and repairs of collections) and; (iv) The Hub at St Mary's Lichfield (to reflect their involvement in the History Access Point in Lichfield. In addition, mention had been made of the various Friends and volunteer groups who had continued to support the service through the Covid-19 pandemic together with the effect of the outbreak on their numbers and working arrangements.

Expand the Context Headlines to include the vision, aims and objectives of the Staffordshire History Centres.

Amend the Service Point graphic to include the Lichfield History Access Point which had opened in December 2018.

Update the information on collections, buildings, outreach, volunteers, partnerships and resources with current statistics and key achievements including increased on-line access to resources such as Find My Past.

- **Developing an Active Partnership Approach** – Amend the text to emphasise work necessary for the delivery of Phase 2 of the Staffordshire History Centre project. Plans were in place to train 102 volunteers to support implementation of the Activity Plan amounting to 4,803 days with a value of £721,050 over the four-year life of the project.
- **Reaching and Engaging New Audiences** – Revise and simplify the text and include details of the SHCP Activity and Interpretation Plans.

During the discussion which ensued Members queried whether volunteer numbers were expected to recover post the Covid-19 pandemic. In response the Deputy Chief Executive and Director referred to the age profile of former volunteers which had placed them in the most vulnerable category for contracting the disease. As a result, many had stopped volunteering during the pandemic citing the loss of face to face contact as the cause. However, the service would make efforts to boost recruitment and it was hoped that the decline of the pandemic and lifting of the social distancing rules might encourage people to come forward. Also, the progress of the SHCP could attract new unpaid help.

The Board paid tribute to the work of the volunteers to date without whom the significant progress in the various projects and initiatives undertaken by the service in recent years could not have been achieved.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That the revised Forward Plan, “Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Archive and Heritage Service Vision” as set out in Appendix 2 to the report, be approved.

14. Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Archive Service: Impact of COVID-19 on the Service

The Committee considered a joint report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Families and Communities (Staffordshire County Council) and Director of Housing and Community Services (Stoke-on-Trent City Council) informing them of the impact of the 2020, 2021 Covid-19 pandemic on the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Archive and Heritage Service (Schedule 2 to the signed minutes).

Plans for recovering onsite services began during May 2020 using:- (i) national Government guidance; (ii) sector guidance published by The National Archives; (iii)

sharing ideas with other archive services through Archives West Midlands and; (iv) advice from the two Authorities' health and safety teams.

Discussions with staff had informed the development of an Issues Log where matter of concern were identified together with potential solutions. This information informed a Service Recovery Plan and risk assessment using existing corporate templates. The first phase of the Recovery Plan was to enable staff to return to Covid-19 secure offices where guidance and Personal Protective Equipment was made available. Accordingly, Staffordshire Record Office, William Salt Library and the County Museum offices were reopened to staff from 15 June 2020 and Stoke on Trent City Archives was reopened to staff from 22 June 2020.

However, whilst not all of the above sites had reopened to visitors owing to staffing issues and difficulties in implementing social distancing measures, the Staffordshire Record Office opened (on an appointment only basis) on 14 July 2020. In addition, plans were in place for City Archives and the Lichfield History Access Point, St Mary's to re-admit visitors once current lockdown restrictions had been eased. In each case, special measures were in place to ensure compliance with social distancing and hygiene advice. Also, publicity campaigns advised visitors of the new arrangements and what to expect during their appointments.

The response to the reopening of onsite services had been overwhelmingly positive although actual in-person visitor numbers had varied. During the period up to 29 December 2020 there were 168 visits out of a possible 260 which corresponded to a 65% occupancy rate. The highest take-up of appointments was during July and August 2020 (87%) but this rate declined with the introduction of compulsory face coverings.

Remote access to services such as copying, photocopying and research had been restored from June 2020 with demand increasing following the restoration of on-site services. On-line enquiries experienced an 84% increase during July 2020 when compared to the corresponding period in 2019, with the rate stabilising at 14% by December 2020. Remote orders also increased by 4% when compared to corresponding period in 2019.

During the temporary closure of on-site services, the Archives and Heritage service had focused on increasing output via social media. New initiatives included the setting up a volunteers' blog ('The Learning Room') and increasing the production of newsletters to two per month. The online Palaeography class hosted by lecturer from Keele University Latin Summer school, had continued together with blogs on the use of Staffordshire Past Track, online maps, recent accessions and other features from local libraries. In addition, volunteers had submitted blog pieces on topics including the history of gardening, the social history of medicine, English placenames. The Minton Archive Twitter account started a "tweeted history" of the Minton company together with a round-up of blog posts for those without a Twitter account. The long-standing monthly "Folio Friday" series had continued, with the site's anniversary update, which usually comprised a large catalogue update or feature launch, being spread over 3 months instead.

In 2021 a new "Folio Frivolity" series of daily tweets and fortnightly round-up blogs had been launched highlighting artwork from the Archive's folios. The service had

maintained work on two externally funded projects ie The Staffordshire's Asylums and The Bawdy Courts of Lichfield, the completion dates for which had been extended. The blog for Staffordshire Asylums had remained active with help from volunteers whilst The Bawdy Courts of Lichfield blog research group had met on-line with weekly posts being generated. Both blogs had proved to be very popular with 10,560 and 4,443 views respectively since June 2020.

Maintaining engagement with volunteers during the pandemic been challenging. Whilst a total of 135 volunteers had supported the service in 2019/20, 45 had continued to work with the team from April 2020. However, staff had provided copies of materials and tried several methods to keep in touch including by email, the Facebook group, telephone, and on-line meetings. It was clear how important face-face meetings were to volunteers and plans were in place to re-engage with them once restrictions permitted.

All staff had been supported to work from home since the start of the pandemic which had enabled significant progress to be made on cataloguing collections and making more information available on-line. Over 16,000 new entries had been added from in excess of 700 separate accessions.

The Archives and Heritage Service in partnership with Staffordshire Library Service had engaged with residents from across the County to create a lasting record of the Covid-19 pandemic. 'Lockdown Memories' explored the impact of the pandemic and social distancing measures on the lives of Staffordshire people and communities. An online questionnaire was launched in August to gather stories and testimonies about people experiences following which contributions were received from schools, local history groups and individuals of all ages. Many had also offered to donate photographs, drawings, and documents. Finished artwork, donated items, memories and poems will all form part of a 'Lockdown Memories' exhibition in due course.

A similar online appeal 'Collecting during Coronavirus' was launched in June 2020 by Stoke-on-Trent City Archives and Stoke-on-Trent's Museum Service.

A successful bid to the West Midlands Museum Development Recovery Grants scheme enabled work on Lockdown Memories with a poet and visual artist in order to run a series of workshops in late 2020. Those involved had created poems and 'memory maps' based on their experiences of lockdown which would be made available on-line in February and March 2021. Unfortunately, a planned follow-on digital creative writing project had been postponed owing to the return of lockdown restrictions in January 2021.

Overall, the impact of the 2020/21 Covid-19 pandemic on the service had been both negative and positive. The reduction in onsite visitors had reduced income by an estimated 25% and the loss of onsite volunteering and engagement activities had also been difficult for both the service and its volunteers. Whilst some contact had been maintained great efforts would need to be made to recruit and re-engage volunteers once restrictions had ease. However, online activity and engagement had increased although this has been difficult to maintain whilst also recovering physical and remote services. Also, externally funded projects had been delivered following the extension of deadlines.

Staff had adapted well to homeworking and the planned restructure of the service which had been delayed was being implemented.

During the discussion which ensued Members paid tribute to the work of the Archive and Heritage service and dedication of its staff during the pandemic. They welcomed progress made in the use of digital technology and the contribution of the service in helping residents cope with lockdown restrictions. In response to a question regarding 'Lock-Down Memories', the Deputy Chief Executive and Director said that she hoped an exhibition would be included as part of the opening of the new Staffordshire History Centre. However, alternative arrangements would be made if this could not be arranged.

RESOLVED – That the report be received and noted.

15. Predicted Outturn 2019/21 and 2021/22 Revenue Budget

The Committee considered a joint report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities (Staffordshire County Council) and Director for Housing and Community Services (Stoke-on-Trent City Council) giving details of the predicted outturn for the Joint Archives Service for 2020/21 and proposed 2021/22 net revenue budget (schedule 3 to the signed minutes).

Members noted that a spend of £777,152 was predicted against an approved budget of £613,830 which resulted in an estimated overall overspend of £162,322 comprising:- (i) Core Services - £71,000; (ii) Staffordshire County Council Sites and Public Services - £92,000 and; (iii) Stoke-on-Trent Sites and Public Services – (£56,000). However, Staffordshire County Council had confirmed they would fund the overspend in the event that it materialised at the year end.

With regard to the General Reserve, the current balance was £204,830 (which included a receipt of £1,364 from the New Burdens Fund and an outlay of £4,000 towards the Development Phase of the Staffordshire History Centre Project following the successful Round 1 Bid).

They also noted the predicted balances in the Joint Archives Reserves ie:- (i) General Reserve - £107,059; (ii) Acquisition Reserve - £57,542 and; (ii) Art Fund Grant - £0.

With regard to 2021/22, the Joint Archives Service budget was £607,720 comprising £399,520 or 66% from the County Council and £208,200 or 34% from the City Council.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That the 2021/22 Joint Archive Service net Revenue Budget be approved.

16. Staffordshire History Centre Project - Update

The Committee considered a report by the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Families and Communities (Staffordshire County Council) and Director of Housing and Community Services (Stoke-on-Trent City Council) updating them on progress with regard to the Staffordshire History Centre (SHC) Project (schedule 4 to the signed minutes).

Members learned that good progress had been made since their previous meeting including successful completion of the National Lottery Heritage Fund's (NLHF) Mid-Stage Review in December 2020. The Activity Plan had been re-written following intelligence provided by the Audience Research and Learning Plan to include target audiences currently underrepresented in the Audience Profile ie:- (i) Families and Children living within 21 miles/37 minute drive from Stafford; (ii) School Groups in Staffordshire; (iii) university Students and Academics; (iv) Adult Learners in Staffordshire; (v) People from Different Cultures and Backgrounds; (vi) People from Areas of Low Engagement in Staffordshire; (vii) People from Rural Communities in Staffordshire; (viii) People with Early On-set Dementia and; (ix) Voluntary Youth Groups in Staffordshire.

The Project Design Team had produced an updated design report to include a new garden with planting with planting to promote increased biodiversity. In addition, storage capacity work had been undertaken to increase storage capacity from two to four floors and submission of a revised Planning Application. A decision on this Application was expected before May 2021 ie prior to further consideration of the Project by NLHF. Also, an Access Strategy had been commissioned to cover physical and intellectual access across the building, activities and interpretation.

The Project contractor had revised the Interpretation Plan to include interpretation of the garden and restoration of the William Salt Library building. Following feedback from the Heritage Fund at the mid-stage review the content of the plan had been rewritten by the staff team to reflect the changes in the Activity Plan.

A Covid-19 impact assessment had been produced in-house which focused on how the building, exhibition, and visitor spaces could be used if social distancing measures were still in place when the Centre opened.

The Business Plan had been written following intelligence from audience research, market analysis, the Activity Plan and strategic context to include updated cashflow and income projections.

The Monitoring and Evaluation Plan had been revised to take account of changes made to the Activity, Interpretation, Design and Business Plans by extending it to include an evaluation of the capital works involved in the Project.

The Cost Plan had been updated and tested to reflect recent quotations received adjusted rates of inflation and the need to provide contingency arrangement where necessary. In addition, further funding had been secured from the County Council and William Salt Library Trust to accompany the additional resource identified from the Archive and Heritage Service budget, as follows:-

Cost heading	Description	Total
Capital costs	Construction, interpretation, website, equipment and fit out	£5,010,900
Other costs – activities	Staff costs, activities, equipment, materials, training and travel	£516,200

Other costs	Recruitment, publicity and promotion, evaluation, contingency, inflation, increased maintenance and management costs, non-cash contributions, volunteer time	£1,621,500
Total		£7,148,600

With regard to timescales, it was expected that a Round Two application would be submitted to the NLHF on 1 March 2021 with a decision expected in June 2021. Subject to permission being granted, the project would then commence in October 2021.

During the discussion which ensued Members recognised the importance of engaging with families and children as reflected in the revised Activity Plan. In reply to a question, the Deputy Chief Executive and Director confirmed that whilst the 2020/21 Covid-19 Pandemic had prevented visits by school groups owing to a lack of social distance compliant accommodation, staff had made visits to a number of schools. However, it was hoped that further progress would be made following the lifting of lockdown restrictions and with the assistance of Entrust, the County Council's education and skills support services partner.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That the further progress made in the Staffordshire History Centre Project be welcomed.

17. Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Archive Service: Tamworth Castle Archive

The Committee considered a joint report of the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Families and Communities (Staffordshire County Council) and the Director of Housing and Community Services (Stoke-on-Trent City Council) regarding the future of the Tamworth Castle Archive (schedule 5 to the signed minutes).

In November 2020 Tamworth Borough Council approached the County Council regarding the Archive which included several locally and regionally significant collections relating to the history of the town. Subsequently, advice and guidance were provided by the Archive and Heritage Service together with assistance to repackage the collections, improve storage conditions and compile inventories. Discussions between the two authorities had also resulted in an agreement to work together to assess the long-term future of the Archive and its location.

Members learned that an application had been made to the National Archives Covid-19 Emergency Fund to support this work. However, the Authority had recently been notified that the application had been unsuccessful. Feedback on the bid was expected from the National Archive in March 2020.

Whilst future plans for the archive collection had not yet been confirmed, both authorities were committed to improving public access to the resource which might mean the collections being moved to Stafford, the Archive and Heritage Service would ensure accessibility through, for example, exhibition loans, digitisation, and a comprehensive catalogue on the online catalogue.

In the discussion which ensued members expressed their disappointment that the application for grant aid had been unsuccessful. However, they were hopeful agreement could be reached by the two Authorities to secure the future of the Archive and improve access to it be members of the public.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That a further update on the future of the Tamworth Castle Archive be provided to the Committee following confirmation of the plans with Tamworth Borough Council.

18. Date of next meeting - Thursday 10 June 2021 at 10.30 am, Virtual/on-line (provisional)

19. Exclusion of the public

RESOLVED – That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business which involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the paragraphs of Part 1 of schedule 12A (as amended) of the local Government Act 1972 indicated below”.

PART TWO

20. Exempt minutes of meeting held on 12 November 2020

RESOLVED – That the exempt minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2020 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

Chairman