

Members Interest
N/A

Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Joint Archive Committee 25 February 2021

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

Recommendation(s)

1. That the committee notes the report updating on the impact of COVID-19 and plans for recovery of onsite services.

Report of Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Families and Communities (Staffordshire County Council) and Director of Housing and Community Services (Stoke on Trent City Council)

Reasons for Recommendations

Summary

2. On 23 June 2020 a report was brought to the Joint Archives Committee on the impact of COVID-19 upon the Archive Service. This report updates members on how the service has continued to operate and respond to demands during varying social distancing restrictions.

3. The impact has had negative and positive outcomes, as closure of onsite services meant access to collections was withdrawn and face to face engagement and contact with users ceased. Following reopening of onsite services balancing online engagement has been more difficult but has continued ensuring access to collections.

Recovery of onsite services

4. Plans for recovering onsite services began during May 2020 using national government guidance, sector guidance published by The National Archives, sharing ideas with other archive services through Archives West Midlands and advice from the two authorities' health and safety teams.

5. A key part of planning to recover and reopen the service to visitors was early staff engagement. Discussions with staff informed the development of an issues log each issue was worked through and solutions/ mitigations were identified. This information fed into the service recovery plan and risk assessment using corporate templates. The first phase recovery was enabling staff to return to COVID secure offices with guidance and PPE available to support access. Staffordshire Record Office, William Salt Library and the County Museum offices were reopened to staff from 15 June onwards. Stoke on Trent City Archives was reopened to staff from 22 June 2020.

6. However ,not all sites could be reopened to visitors. The William Salt Library is a grade II* listed building with small rooms and difficult access routes. In agreement with

the William Salt Library Trust this building has not reopened to visitors and the collection has been made available for use in Staffordshire Record Office.

7. Stoke on Trent City Archives and Lichfield History Access Point have not yet reopened to visitors. Both services are within a shared building making access more complex to plan for safe use. Stoke on Trent City Archives has had some staffing issues as two staff retired at the end of March 2020. These vacancies will have been filled by early April. A further member of staff retires at the end of March, so that vacancy will then need to be filled, interim plans are being worked out and a detailed recovery plan has been developed to enable the City Archives to reopen to visitors once the current lockdown ends and then plan receives corporate approval. Plans are in place re reopen the Lichfield History Access Point when current restrictions are eased to permit visitors within St Mary's.

8. Staffordshire Record Office was reopened to the public on 14th July 2020. All visits were by appointment only and required advance notice to order documents. Capacity in the searchroom reduced by 75% to increase space for social distancing. Screens and hand sanitiser were made available and since August staff and visitors have been required to wear face masks.

9. The service website has been regularly updated with current restrictions, guidance on planning a visit and promotion of the service reopening. In addition a reopening route map was shared on social media, welcome back posters and training for staff on implementing the new procedures. A YouTube video was created to familiarise people on what to expect when visiting the service.

10. The response to reopening the onsite service was positive though personal visitor numbers have varied. Up to 29 December 2020 the service has been able to open for just 21 weeks taking account of the November and current lockdown. The service has received 168 out of a possible 260 visitors averaging a 65% occupancy rate. The highest occupancy rate was during July and August at 87% until compulsory face coverings were introduced when it dropped to 65%. Comments from visitors have been very positive and appreciative of access onsite:

- *thank you so much for being so helpful. Staffordshire Record Office, always come up trumps :) who knows, I may be back asking more questions :) Have a lovely day, keep safe and well.*
- *Thank you very very much,very emotional,made my day*
- *thank you, thank you, thank you. I will certainly do as you say. It is so good to receive support from someone with such experience even if inexperience and experience come to the same conclusions!*
- *Thank you very much for helping out with information. Whilst doing this research into long-deceased relatives, it's sometimes nice to have contact with real living people!*

Recovering remote services

11. Once staff were able to return to offices from June this enabled more remote services to be delivered. Copying, photography and research services were offered as an alternative to visiting in person. A limited service was available during the first national lockdown however demand increased once the onsite service reopening was publicised.

12. Enquiries increased by 84% in July (compared to 2019) as visitors contacted the service about accessing collections in person or for an order. This stabilised at an average of 14% increase up to December 2020. Remote orders increased significantly once they could be processed. On average there is a 17% increase since June and overall a 4% increase compared to 2019.

Maintaining online engagement

13. During the temporary closure, the service focused upon increasing the output of social media, setting up a new volunteers' blog [The Learning Room](#), and producing two newsletters per month instead of one. Our online [Palaeography class](#) with Jim Sutton, a lecturer at the Keele Latin Summer school, has continued. Jim sends us examples for people to work on and provides individual feedback on their transcripts. We have also added blog pieces ourselves on how to use our sites, such as [Staffordshire Pastrack](#), guides to maps online, recent accessions and features by local libraries and the County Archaeologist in the [Guide to Research](#) section. Volunteers have continued to send in blog pieces about the history of gardening and other themes. Prof. Alannah Tomkins from [Keele University](#), had been contributing each week with blog posts about the [social history of medicine between 1628 and 1886](#), this has stopped due to time pressures. The blog on English Place-names with the [Institute for Name-Studies](#) at Nottingham University has also stopped, we hope to get this set up again later this year. The Learning Room blog has generated 5,205 views since June. As the first lockdown began the Minton Archive Twitter account started a "tweeted history" of the Minton company adapted from a detailed manuscript held in the collection. These daily tweets eventually ran all the way until September, generating just over 146,000 impressions from a total of 333 tweets. For those not on Twitter 25 weekly "round-up" blog posts brought together the previous 7 days' worth of tweets (with the added benefit of making all the tweets searchable from within the Minton Archive site). The long-standing monthly "Folio Friday" series continued, and the site's anniversary update - which usually comprises a large catalogue update/feature launch - was this year spread out over 3 months & concentrated on multiple smaller updates instead. In 2021 a new "Folio Frivolity" series of daily tweets, which highlight artwork from the Archive's folios, began and round-ups – this time fortnightly - were once again put together for the blog. These are ongoing and are planned to continue into the summer of 2021.

14. We have continued to maintain work on two externally funded projects having gained extensions to complete both projects. The [Staffordshire's Asylums](#) project blog has remained active with weekly posts over lockdown with input from volunteers and Lucy Smith, collaborative doctoral award PhD student at Keele. The Blog has

generated many enquiries about access to patient case records, and has encouraged engagement with the collection. The themes have ranged from gardening to learning disabilities, as well as stress and anxiety. Mental health themes have chimed with the public throughout lockdown. The blog has generated views 10,560 views since June.

15. The [Bawdy Courts of Lichfield](#) blog research group which met at the History Access Point now meets on MS Teams and posts have gone out weekly. The blog group was joined in September by Susie Johns, who has a 3-year post with us on a collaborative doctoral award studentship, again with Keele University. Susie will be taking over the blog as part of her PhD work next month. The blog has generated 4,443 views since June.

16. Maintaining increased engagement whilst recovering onsite services has been difficult. Updated statistics still show an increase compared to the previous year:

- Twitter impressions up 58%
- Facebook reach up 36%
- Staffordshire Past Track views up 79%
- Engagement is much more interactive with users commenting more frequently

17. The new YouTube channel which was setup for the [Staffordshire History Centre](#) with launch of content timed for Staffordshire Day on 1 May has had four more videos posted. The channel has received 1,148 views since its launch.

Volunteers and collections

18. Maintaining contact with volunteers has been challenging. 135 volunteers supported the service in 2019-2020. 45 continued to work with the team from April 2020. Staff provided copies of materials and tried several methods to keep in touch: email, Facebook group, telephone, and Zoom meetings. 20 remain active and it is clear that social face to face interaction is key for volunteers. The service will focus on re-engaging volunteers once restrictions permit.

19. All staff were supported to work at home, and this enabled progress to be made on collections work and increasing information in the online catalogue. Staff were able to input information from paper catalogues and expanding some series descriptions. This means over 16,000 new entries had been added from well over 700 separate accessions, representing nearly 500 boxes in terms of bulk. In addition, work continued adding a collection level description for uncatalogued accessions of which we are now at over 99%. Some of this work has been done by collection volunteers (over 2,600 entries). Increased information in the online catalogue enables wider access to collections both onsite or through our remote services.

Lockdown Memories

20. The Archives and Heritage Service in partnership with Staffordshire Library Service have engaged with people from across the county to create a lasting record of the Covid-19 pandemic within Staffordshire.. 'Lockdown Memories' explores the impact of the pandemic and lockdown measures upon the lives of Staffordshire people and communities.

21. In August we launched an online questionnaire asking for people's stories and testimonies about their experiences; from working on frontline services, coping with self-isolation or social distancing, helping to support neighbours or exploring new places in their local area during daily lockdown walks. Schools, local history groups and people of all ages have contributed, offering to donate photographs, drawings and documents relating to lockdown. To date we have received 128 responses. The finished artwork, donated items, memories and poems will form part of a 'Lockdown Memories' exhibition to take place once restrictions have eased. A similar online appeal 'Collecting during Coronavirus' was launched in June by Stoke-on-Trent City Archives and Stoke-on-Trent's Museum Service.

22. A successful bid to the West Midlands Museum Development Recovery Grants scheme enabled us to work with a poet, Mel Woodend, and a visual artist, Jhinuk Sarkar, to run a series of workshops in late 2020. Using Zoom, the workshops involved a wide range of people working to create poems and 'memory maps' based on their experiences of lockdown. These will be produced in digital format and will be made available on our online platforms in February and March 2021. A planned follow-on digital creative writing project has been postponed due to the return of lockdown in January 2021, however this will involve working with three schools to produce poetry based on the students' experiences which they will perform and will be shared as video clips.

Impact

23. The impact on the service has been both negative and positive. The reduction in onsite visitors has been very significant and has affected income with an estimated 25% reduction forecast. The loss of onsite volunteering and engagement activities has also been difficult for both the service and its volunteers. Whilst contact has been maintained the service will need to recruit and re-engage volunteers once restrictions ease. The age range of volunteers is predominantly over 65 and this group may be cautious in returning to group gatherings though it is clear the social interaction has been missed.

24. Online activity and engagement has increased though this has been difficult to maintain whilst also recovering physical and remote services. Externally funded projects have been delivered after negotiating extensions to enable project outcomes to be met. These projects have generated successful blogs and the Asylums project has particularly resonated with people during this time.

24. Staff adapted to working from home very well and refocused priorities on increasing information about collections online. The planned restructure of the service was delayed but is now being implemented.

Next steps

25. The immediate priority is the resumption of onsite services at Staffordshire Record Office and reopening Stoke on Trent City Archives once the recovery plan is approved.

26. The Service will continue to maintain digital engagement to support volunteers, engage people who are still self-isolating, and support recovery of remote services.

Plans will continue to be developed for the return of volunteers to the onsite service when restrictions ease. During the spring a digital exhibition is planned and online talks for Staffordshire Day 2021.

Appendix 1

Equalities implications:

Access to the service is now impacted by an individual's ability to access online resources. Access to Find My Past is available for service volunteers and the Library Service has access to Ancestry for registered library users. Resumption of onsite services will enable wider access where digital access is not an option.

Legal implications:

The Service continued to respond to enquiries ensuring compliance with information legislation.

Resource and Value for money implications:

The suspension of services has impacted on income with a 25% reduction estimated. It has also delayed the delivery of MTFs savings for Staffordshire County Council though this has been covered by the COVID-19 grant received by the Council.

Risk implications:

There was a risk that externally funded projects could be delayed but this has been mitigated through constructive discussions with funders. The National Archives have adopted a flexible approach to Archive Service Accreditation and supported services during this uncertain period. Arts Council England have postponed all Museum Accreditation reviews for another year.

Climate Change implications:

With most staff working from home there has been a reduction in travel to the workplace and energy use. However this may be offset by increased personal heating, lighting and broadband use. Strongrooms have continued to be maintained with essential checks on collections.

Health Impact Assessment screening:

Staff wellbeing may have been negatively impacted by isolation and lack of social interaction in the same way that users and volunteers have been affected. Service team meetings have been moved online to Microsoft Teams and all managers encouraged to deliver 1-1s and check in on staff.

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List of Background Papers

Papers

Contact/Directorate/ext number

Staffordshire Archives and Heritage Recovery Plan
Stoke on Trent City Archives Recovery Plan.