

Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Wednesday 22 November 2023

Staffordshire History Centre Update

Recommendations

I recommend that the Committee:

- a. Reviews the progress of the project since February 2023
- b. Comments on the capital work and activities to date
- c. Receives the key findings from the independent evaluation report.

Local Member Interest:

N/A

Report of Councillor Victoria Wilson Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture

Summary

What is the Overview and Scrutiny Committee being asked to do and why?

1. The Staffordshire History Centre project is an £8,780,239 project to bring together the collections of Staffordshire Archives and the William Salt Library onto one site. It will also provide a single exhibition space for the Archive, Library and County Museum collections, displaying them together for the first time and provide a new cultural venue within Stafford.
2. The History Centre is essential not just as the place to secure our collections but importantly to provide access for a whole range of visitors. It will offer new visitor spaces and storage for important historic collections dating back over a thousand years. The restored and repurposed William Salt Library will form both part of the Centre and offer small business and entrepreneurial spaces, whilst the adjoining 19th century cottage will provide town centre residential accommodation.
3. The project is also delivering a four year activity programme including family activities, learning sessions for schools, touring exhibitions, behind the scenes tours, and events to engage people across the county. This enables a wider range of people to engage with Staffordshire's

hugely significant historic collections and discover more about the people and places within the county.

4. The project has been awarded a grant of £4,858,699 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The total match funding is £3,921,540 which includes Staffordshire County Council funding, grants from other organisations, donations from the Friends of Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent Archive Service and the Friends of the William Salt Library and in-kind contributions from volunteers.
5. The Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee is being asked to receive a further update on the Staffordshire History Centre project, comment on progress and note the receipt of the first evaluation report.

Report

Background

6. Staffordshire County Council's Archive and Heritage Service brought a report to the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 3 February 2023 on the progress of the Staffordshire History Centre project. Comments from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were reported to the Joint Archives Committee on 28th February. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested further updates on the project and a site visit which has been arranged to take place prior to this meeting.
7. Since the last report rapid progress has been made in constructing the new History Centre. A full summer programme of activities has been delivered and the Archive and Heritage Service is currently participating in the Staffordshire History Festival with the Libraries and Arts Service. Three further progress reports have been submitted to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) and grant claims. Three more contracts have been awarded. The first evaluation report has been received focused on the construction contract.

Project progress update on capital work

8. The construction contractor, Pave Aways Limited, formally took possession of the History Centre site from Staffordshire County Council on 1st February 2023.
9. Pre-Construct Archaeology (PCA) commenced their watching brief for the project on 31st January 2023. They observed the initial groundworks and excavations for the piling work for the new strongrooms. PCA were on site for 33 days which exceeded the agreed time frame and budget. The

specification was reviewed by the County Archaeologist after which agreement was reached with PCA to scale back the work.

10. To ensure ongoing access to the archive collections in a manner that complied with site health and safety a separate access route was constructed for Archive and Heritage staff. This route was enabled by access from an adjoining site owned by Stafford Borough Council. A temporary licence was issued until the site was sold in the summer. Conversations with the new landowner have permitted the site access to remain within a smaller space. The safe access route constructed by Pave Aways has been essential to maintain the limited public access to collection. See paragraphs 23-25 for more information on this.
11. The first construction phase included demolition of some structures, piling tests and excavations for the new strongrooms. This uncovered some previously unknown walls, redundant gas supplies and asbestos from previous buildings. These were removed by specialist contractors.
12. The piling work has been completed for the strongrooms and the concrete slabs for the new stores are up to the third floor out of four. Procurement of the shelving for the new strongrooms has been completed with the contract awarded to Bruynzeel. The shelving design has been agreed with input from the Archive and Heritage staff team.
13. The foundation slabs, steel posts and columns are in place for the Covered Courtyard which will contain the new public entrance and exhibition space. The roof work is ongoing and the link to the William Salt Library building is being constructed. The first fix for mechanical and electrical (M&E) work is underway. Blockwork for the back wall which will hold the curated wall display is almost complete.
14. Once the roof was installed for the Covered Courtyard it was noted that natural light levels were reduced in the conservation studio which is adjacent to the space. This has been reviewed and the proposal is to install skylights to mitigate the impact.
15. Refurbishment and reconfiguration of Staffordshire Record Office has progressed. Internal demolitions are complete. Partition walls are in place for the new spaces including the searchroom and the event space. The old air conditioning unit has been decommissioned. The first fix for M&E is underway.
16. There have been delays to works on the William Salt Library listed building. This was due to a requirement to apply for listed building consent for the repair of one of the floors and replacement of a staircase in the Cottage part of the building. A positive meeting with Stafford

Borough Council's conservation officer enabled this to be submitted and approved in the summer.

17. Work to repair both the Georgian townhouse and the Cottage is underway including structural repairs where there has been movement or settlement throughout the life of the building. Other restoration work and window repairs are ongoing. The two buildings have been separated for their two future purposes of a residential let (Cottage) and History Centre/office lettings (Townhouse). Three period wallpapers revealed in the Townhouse will be cleaned and a section of them will remain on display protected by a clear vision panel.
18. The fabrication and digital work for the exhibition and interpretation has been developed to RIBA stage 4 with designers Iagemakers and their sub-contractors. This work has focused on the curated wall display which will hold items from across the three collections highlighting key themes and stories from Staffordshire's history.
19. The activity programme has been used to undertake co-curation work with users to select objects and documents, develop interpretation and test content. There have been workshops with staff to look at mock-ups of cases, first draft colour schemes, labelling, and digital and manual interactives (activities to engage people with the exhibition). A critical friends group has been formed for the project and they have fed back on initial designs. Further workshops are planned in October and November to look at interpretation in the William Salt Library.

Project progress update on activities

20. From February half term through to the end of October a varied programme of activities has been developed and delivered including:
 - a. Events for half-terms and summer holidays targeted at local families delivered in libraries across Staffordshire.
 - b. The team also participated in key events such as the Science Fair and History Fair at Perton Library, National Lottery Heritage Fund open week and Heritage Open Day. These included stalls and behind the scenes tours of the Museum Stores with one focused on the significant carriage collection.
 - c. These events tested awareness of the Staffordshire History Centre and the types of activities which families would like to attend. Children played an active role through craft and play to select their favourite collection items for display and suggest games or things to do at the new History Centre.

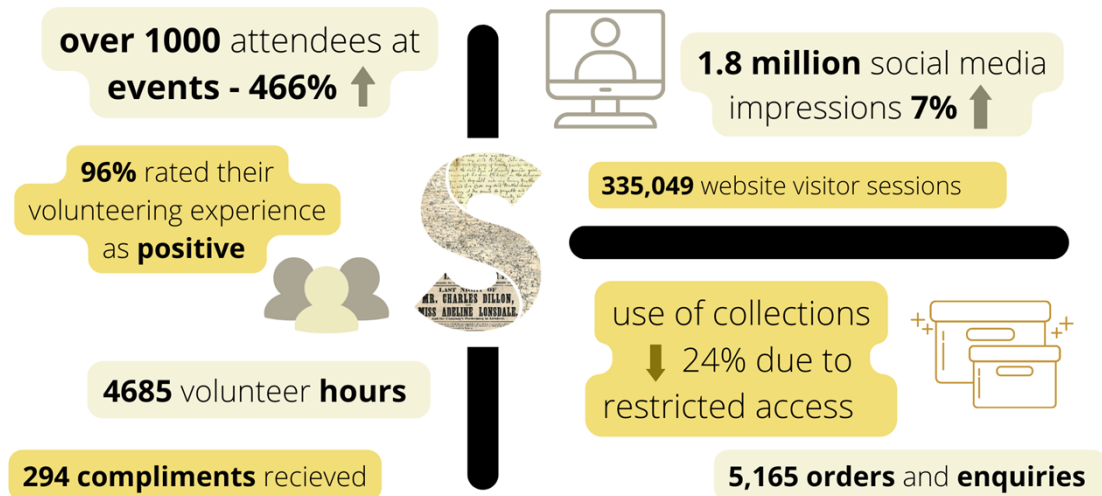
- d. In partnership with the Library and Arts Service the Archives and Heritage Service attended the Staffordshire County Show, engaging with 573 visitors.
 - e. Walking tours of Eastgate Street have been delivered during October.
21. The team have developed learning sessions in partnership with local schools and Stafford College. Fifty-four teachers have participated in the teacher network. From April - June the Engagement and Access team engaged 611 students and teachers across co-production workshops and assemblies. These have been used to generate enthusiasm for the project, build relationships with the teacher network and test audience responses to the thematic content. Stafford College have provided excellent feedback from staff and students on the session they helped to create. Three young people spent a week with the Service on work experience. This tested a new model and their feedback will influence development of the offer for placements including improved communication with parents and schools.
22. A local history course for adult learners has been developed with the University of Keele. This is being piloted starting from 3rd October using an external venue and original collections. The first term runs to Christmas with a second term planned for the new year. Initial response was slow however providing more detailed course information has increased the attendees enabling the course to cover its costs.
23. The programme of touring exhibitions continues with 'A Case for the Ordinary' Asylums exhibition currently at the Ancient High House. The Rugeley Power Station and the Climate Change pop-up exhibitions continue to tour community venues throughout 2023-2024. Work has commenced on two new exhibitions: 'Beneath our Feet' about natural resources in Staffordshire and 'Knowing Your Onions' on food. Formal and informal learning resources are being developed to accompany the exhibitions and young people from the Tamworth Holiday and Activities Food programme responded to our collections selecting material to be included in the exhibition.
24. Part of the activity programme includes cataloguing of the William Salt Library collection to enable it to be more discoverable for research. This work is being led by one of our Collection Officers supported by the Project Cataloguer and volunteers. Together they have catalogued 4,857 out of the 12,000 items which is 40% of the target.
25. Work is progressing more slowly on the procurement of a new website for the Staffordshire History Centre. This work involves liaison with ICT, procurement and legal teams to ensure the specification is comprehensive, meets Staffordshire County Council's security

requirements and will deliver a new digital presence for the History Centre. The contract is intended to be advertised in 2023 with development of the new website before the History Centre opens. Digitisation of collections to widen access has continued with images from the McCann collection and Michael Fisher transparency collection digitised by volunteers. 4,000 photographs from the 1948 Staffordshire aerial survey will be digitised in 2023 and made available on Staffordshire Past Track in 2024.

Public Services during construction period

26. The Archive and Heritage Service is an accredited archive service and museum and is appointed as a Place of Deposit by its sector lead body, The National Archives. As such it is required to provide access to public records during the construction period, albeit with restrictions.
27. The Archive and Heritage Service provides access through its enquiry service, provision of copies from collections and limited research. It has developed a process for assessing requests for in-person visits to view material where they [meet the criteria for access](#). In person visits are provided once a week in a supervised room at Eastgate House.
28. Producing archive material from the strongrooms through the construction site has been challenging and requires advance notice, planning and assessment of the archives to ensure they can be transported safely. The process has been subject to risk assessment and checked by the Health and Safety team. The National Archives have used this model to share with other services with temporary closures in place.
29. The performance of the whole Service was reported to the Joint Archives Committee in August 2023 through the [Annual Report](#). A summary of the outturn for key performance indicators is given below. It demonstrates increasing online engagement and attendance to events. Volunteer hours, and their experience has remained consistent. The use of the remote services and compliments have also held up. Use of collections has decreased during the period of restricted access.

Annual Report 2022/23 - Performance Indicators



Finance

30. Four claims have been submitted to the National Lottery Heritage Fund. A summary of the finance is given below:

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24 to date	Total to date
Expenditure	£101,400	£418,593	£1,463,922	£1,983,915
Financed By:				
Income	(£101,400)	(£418,593)	(£1,463,922)	(£1,983,915)

31. The total spend to date against the project is £1,983,915, this has been financed by a number of funding streams including Staffordshire County Council, National Heritage Lottery Fund and various other external sources that has been raised to contribute towards specific works within the project.

Project Evaluation

32. All projects funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund are required to evaluate their progress covering both capital work and activities. This enables projects to identify best practice and lessons learnt and implement them during delivery.

33. The Audience Agency were appointed in June 2023 to evaluate the History Centre project. The initial report focuses on the first six months of the construction work. The Audience Agency conducted surveys and

interviews with key staff from the Archives and Heritage Service, Staffordshire County Council Property Services, Procurement, trustees from the William Salt Library Trust, design team, main contractor and sub-contractors.

34. Key findings from the report are summarised in Appendix 1. Overall the report demonstrates the project is well managed with strong communication between partners and contractors.

Programme and timescales

35. The project is currently on programme for the new extensions and refurbishment of the old Record Office. Work on the listed building was delayed whilst awaiting approval of listed building consent and is behind schedule. However overall the project remains on programme.

36. The estimated completion date for construction is summer 2024 and following fit out the planned opening date is autumn 2024.

Link to Strategic Plan

37. The Staffordshire History Centre project directly links to the following strategic priority: 2 Live in sustainable and thriving communities.

Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity

38. No Links identified.

Community Impact

39. Refer to CIA guidance on the [Learning Hub](#)

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

Appendix 1 - Staffordshire History Centre Evaluation Report key findings.

Community Impact Assessment

Contact Details

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