

# Wirral Museums Service Business Plan 2011-2016



Williamson Art Gallery & Museum  
and  
Birkenhead Priory & St. Mary's Tower



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# Wirral Museums Service Business Plan 2011-2016

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Wirral Museums Service is part of the Technical Services Department of Wirral Council

For many years the Museums Service operated two venues: Birkenhead Priory and the Williamson Art Gallery & Museum. Analysis of the service provision in 1979 led to the creation of a professionally-based staff structure, with four professional museum posts, and radical improvements to collection records, storage and conservation. During the 1980s and 1990s there was capital investment in both Birkenhead Priory and the Williamson Art Gallery & Museum, and there was an expansion of museums sites and services, although these did not become Registered Museums. These additions included Egerton Bridge, Shore Road Pumping Station, Wirral Museum in Birkenhead Town Hall, Wirral Transport Museum incorporating Birkenhead Tramways, and Wirral Archives Service. The last Museums Service Business Plan was approved by Cabinet on 31 January 2002 (minute 531).

Now Wirral's Museums Service is being restructured, centred on the Williamson Art Gallery & Museum and Birkenhead Priory, both of which are Accredited Museums under the current Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) Museum Accreditation Scheme. Wirral Archives Service was transferred to the Finance Department in 2007.

The restructure has become necessary following the Council decision to dispose of a number of assets to other operators. The relevant minutes of the report to Council on 9 February 2009, and which confirmed the decision of Cabinet, are listed below:

That the Wirral Museum be closed but that a new sustainable use which will secure the future of this iconic building be sought and expressions of interest invited.

That the Wirral Transport Museum be transferred to a Community Development Trust, given suitable terms and conditions, or, if interest is expressed by an operator in the whole Pacific Road/Tramshed site, that the specialist role of the Transport Museum be protected as far as possible.

The disposal process is still on-going and it is expected that Wirral Transport Museum and Birkenhead Tramway will be passed over to Merseytravel to manage, develop and operate. The lease on Shore Road Pumping Station has been given up and Merseytravel may take up a future option on the building. No decision has been made about the disposal or future of Egerton Bridge although it is no longer a functioning visitor attraction and is currently secured against vandalism. To date it has not been possible to find a viable alternative owner and/or operator for Birkenhead Town Hall. The Council's Asset Management team are developing alternative uses within Council ownership.

The service offered by the present Museums Service, and that envisaged for the future, is governed to some extent by the requirements of the Museums Accreditation Scheme. The present scheme is under review, especially following the demise of the MLA nationally, but it is expected that Wirral Museums Service will aspire to retain Accredited Museum status.

The Accreditation Scheme sets nationally agreed standards for UK museums. To qualify museums must meet clear basic requirements on how they care for and document their collections, how they are governed and managed, and on the information and services they offer to users. Accreditation benefits museum visitors and users of the Museums Service. It supports museum managers and governing bodies in planning and developing services, and it provides a benchmark for grant-making organisations, sponsors and donors.

**Aims of Accreditation:**

- To encourage all museums and galleries to achieve minimum standards in museum management, user services, visitor facilities and collections management.
- To foster confidence in museums as bodies which (a) hold collections in trust for society and (b) manage public resources appropriately.
- To reinforce a shared ethical basis for all bodies which meet the definition of 'museum'.

Accreditation is important to the Wirral Museums Service because restrictions are placed on the dissemination of Government money through MLA (and in the future through Arts Council England who will be taking over many of MLA's responsibilities) and Accreditation is the minimum standard required to access that money. This applies to grant-aid for purchases, access to specialist advice and services, training and information. Failure to meet minimum Accreditation standards would reduce public confidence in the service and compromise access to external funding opportunities, like the Heritage Lottery Fund.

At the time of the Accreditation application, March 2009, a SWOT analysis was undertaken:

<p><b>STRENGTHS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose-built gallery</li> <li>• Broad collection with important works</li> <li>• Loyal core audience</li> <li>• Large Friends group</li> <li>• Good relationships with Primary schools</li> <li>• Repeat visits by Primary schools</li> <li>• Parking at sites</li> </ul> <p>STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subsidised bus service</li> </ul>	<p><b>WEAKNESSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for capital investment in buildings</li> <li>• Majority of collection unavailable for display</li> <li>• Shortage of professional staff</li> <li>• Lack of financial resources</li> <li>• No café or catering facilities</li> <li>• Poor retail offer</li> <li>• Poor family offer</li> </ul> <p>WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developmentally passive</li> </ul>
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	Friend's group
<p><b>OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnerships with NML</li> <li>• Development of local history resource via the Council's Heritage Fund</li> <li>• Development of relationships with Secondary schools</li> <li>• Changing Primary curriculum</li> <li>• External funding for capital developments</li> </ul>	<p><b>THREATS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future of subsidised bus service following transfer to community ownership</li> <li>• No increase in revenue funding</li> <li>• Decrease in revenue funding</li> <li>• No increase in staff team</li> </ul>

In the following 18 months, work has been undertaken to address the identified weaknesses. The educational and family experiences are under development and partnerships with appropriate organisations are being explored to promote this offer. The Council has agreed to invest £2m of capital funding in the sites which will help to address the gallery environment and the catering and retail offer at the Williamson, and both facility and structural difficulties at the Priory. However, other changes are also manifest which are reflected in the renewed SWOT analysis at **Section 10**.

It is unusual for a Museums Service of the size, and with collections of the importance, of Wirral's to operate with such a small staff base. There is now only one specialist museum professional, which limits the capacity to develop the collection, research into collection items, and preparation of exhibitions and displays within the service. Monitoring conditions, documentation and conservation of collections and improving storage facilities are also of great importance as they have not been adequately addressed or budgeted for in recent years.

## 2. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

### Mission statement:

To make the exploration of Wirral's life and history an interesting and entertaining experience accessible to all sections of society.

### Museums Service Key Objectives:

- To collect items of local, regional, national and international importance, to reflect Wirral's life and history, and to place that in a meaningful context.
- To encourage and enable access to museums collections by all sections of society.
- To ensure the on-going development of the learning opportunities within the Museums Service.
- To continue to develop the sites and venues of the Museums Service through an on-going capital investment programme and to secure external investment.
- To attract visitors and tourists to the Borough through the promotion of the Museums Service.

The Museums Service is either active in, or has the potential to contribute directly or indirectly to, all corporate objectives, dependent upon the emphasis of service development. The Service contributes to quality of life and health and well-being agendas, the education and raising the aspirations of young people, supporting the development of those living in areas of multiple deprivation. It makes a substantial contribution to the cultural and leisure offer of the borough for both residents and visitors. Finally, it can raise the profile of Wirral and its Council in a positive way.

### **3. THE BUILDINGS**

#### **Williamson Art Gallery & Museum**

The purpose-built gallery was opened in 1928 to house the collections of Birkenhead Borough Council, previously displayed in a former library building. In 1974 Wirral Borough Council was created from five local authorities and the collections expanded slightly to absorb those held by the former councils. Now designated a Grade 2 listed building by English Heritage, the Williamson Art Gallery & Museum houses the Council's collection and has permanent collection displays and a varied exhibition programme. Some rooms are available for hire for meetings and performances, a concert standard Steinway grand piano was purchased for the gallery with Arts Council support in the 1970's. The Williamson is Accredited under MLA Accreditation Scheme and has a VAQAS (Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme) Award. There is a small but active 'Friends' society, the Friends of the Williamson Art Gallery & Wirral Museums (Registered Charity no.514641) which also has interests in the whole Museums Service, has close links with schools, local art societies and Wirral Art School, whose annual Degree Show is held at the gallery.

Potential built development at the gallery has been under discussion for many years, especially because of the internal quadrangles which allow expansion without affecting the outside appearance of the Grade 2 listed building. Beginning in 2011 the Council will be investing in the region of £1.3m in capital development and refurbishment of the gallery. The work includes:

- overhauling the roof and replacement the roof lanterns,
- improving ramped access to the front of the building,
- using the small quadrangle to create more storage space allowing existing galleries to be returned to public use,
- using a portion of the large quadrangle to provide more toilet facilities and additional office accommodation (remaining space allows some future development potential),
- creating a small kitchen and serving area in Gallery 14 to enable a shop and café to operate in the building,
- relocating the reception desk and improving the facilities for the Museums Assistants,
- creating a Changing Place, with fully accessible provision,
- installing hidden kitchenettes in Galleries 11 and 12 so that they can be used as a Green Room for performances and an education and family learning or meeting space,
- installing glass doors between some of the galleries to help with environmental control and improve fire safety,

- creating ramped access at the side and rear of the building to create a loading bay, improve the movement of the Collection throughout the building and improve fire safety evacuation.

### **Birkenhead Priory & St. Mary's Tower**

Birkenhead Priory includes the oldest standing building on Merseyside, dating from about 1150. The entire site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument which includes buildings listed at Grade 1, Grade 2\* and Grade 2. There are a number of attractions on the site including the Cloister, the Chapter House, the Undercroft and the Refectory and the Tower of the former St. Mary's Church, Birkenhead's first parish church. There are exhibitions relating to the history of the site and its surroundings and to the history of the Priory. From the top of the Tower there are panoramic views of Liverpool and the River Mersey. The Refectory can be hired for functions and events, though facilities are limited. The Priory Parish regularly uses the Chapter House as a place of worship and the Scriptorium is dedicated to HMS Conway as a chapel. Within St. Mary's Tower is a memorial to the lives lost when the Royal Navy submarine Thetis, built at Lairds, sank during sea trials. Birkenhead Priory is accredited under the MLA Accreditation Scheme and has a VAQAS award.

The Priory site is blighted by its location adjacent to run-down small-scale industrial units: the approach to the site is unappealing and unattractive. Access is difficult on foot, requiring negotiating the A41 and the Mersey Tunnel entrance, and signage is unclear. The limited parking area and street parking restrictions are a deterrent for event organisers. The car park at the rear of the area has never been used fully as it does not have ramped access to the site, but Church Street is an enclosed cul-de-sac and is often used by the local scrap merchants for wrecked cars, which worries visitors.

In 2009 the site was placed on the Monuments at Risk Register by English Heritage. Also in this year the Council commissioned, with support from English Heritage, a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) for the site.

Whilst the CMP was being developed the Council agreed around £730,000 of capital investment for the Priory. The work, based on a Condition Survey that formed part of the CMP, includes:

- refurbishment of St. Mary's Tower,
- resolving the drainage issues in the Cloister,
- improving the egress from the Refectory,
- installing a lift to provide access to the Refectory for those with buggies or ambulatory difficulties,
- refurbishing the toilets,
- repairing or removing all the railings on and around the site,
- clearing the car park,
- installing ramped access from the car park to the site,
- building an artefact store to protect the pieces of masonry currently lying around the site,
- building a tank to preserve the timber drain currently exposed to the elements in the Great Hall.



## 4. THE COLLECTIONS

At **Birkenhead Priory** the archaeological finds from the site are on display in the Undercroft. There is also display space in the Refectory for views of the buildings at various times in the past or for temporary exhibitions. The HMS Conway collections in the Scriptorium belong to the Friends of HMS Conway and are not formally loaned to Wirral Museums Service.

The Wirral Museums collection housed at the **Williamson Art Gallery & Museum** largely comprises:

- **Fine art**, particularly 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century watercolour paintings and drawings; work by regionally and locally important artists over three centuries; Philip Wilson Steer (born 1860 in Birkenhead)
- **Maritime models and pictures**, particularly vessels built at Cammell Laird and its predecessor shipyards, and the Mersey Ferries
- **Ceramics** – most noteworthy is the nationally important Della Robbia Pottery, made in Birkenhead 1894-1906; Liverpool porcelain and Seacombe Pottery
- **Arthur H. Lee & Sons**, a fascinating and unusually complete record of the 'Tapestry Works' of A.H. Lee & Sons, operating in Birkenhead 1908-1970, including designs and fabric samples
- **Social history** artefacts – particularly useful as educational tools and drawing on a wide range of ages and experiences
- **Archaeology**, a small local collection but also some important Cypriot artefacts, with Greek, Egyptian and Roman items
- **Civic Silver**, collections drawn from the constituent councils of Wirral pre-1974

This is by no means an exhaustive list of collections, which vary widely in importance. The Fine Art collections are reckoned probably among the best five in the North West. Very many of the items have been collected by donation or bequest from local people since 1912, when Birkenhead's first museum opened, in an effort to develop a relevant and interesting collection. It is still added to by the same means and by judicious but infrequent purchases.

### Documentation

Owing to a severe shortage of professional staff time there is a backlog of documentation which is in need of addressing. A Documentation Plan was drawn up in 2008 with timetables subsequently revised (see Appendix 4) at the request of the Council's Risk Management division and updates have been reported to the Audit & Risk Management Committee, most recently on 30.06.2010. A compensatory payment from Risk Management was agreed to enable the work to be undertaken.

The requirement is to purchase and license a new specialist software system (the most cost-effective and acknowledged industry standard is MODES) and, using short-term contract staff, produce documentation of artefacts received in recent years and transfer information on older collections to a new system. Most of the work is to be completed by April 2012, the final stages, including retrospective documentation by April 2016.



The expertise required is mostly available with existing staff, and with suitable training, much of the clerical work can be completed by junior staff, possibly as work-experience before beginning post-graduate training or taking up a professional museums post. Some additional specialist knowledge will require consultation with other museums, mostly local i.e. National Museums Liverpool and Grosvenor Museum, Chester.

Collection valuations have been undertaken periodically by the Principal Museums Officer (Principal Curator) using published and on-line sources, which was chosen as more cost-effective than commissioning professional valuations by an outside body. It is proposed that the resources be retained to enable continuation of this exercise. The historic value of the collections of paintings and other objects held in the Council's Art Galleries, Museums and Archives is considered incalculable due to their unique nature, but an indicative value of Community Assets is calculated for audit and insurance purposes, as approved by the Audit Commission. The current valuation of collections housed within the Wirral Museums Service (including loans in) is £11,123,100, but this due for revision as a result of improved documentation.

Publication of collection details has been completed in various ways. In recent years a colour catalogue of 100 watercolour highlights from the collection was published when this selection of works formed an exhibition in Ravenna, Italy. A small illustrated booklet of work by Philip Wilson Steer and monographs on some local artists have been published. The most recent, in July 2010, is *Hopps around Wallasey*, with 60 paintings reproduced, a collaboration with Wallasey History Society and Bluecoat Press. Staff are currently working with graphic designers within Wirral Council to produce a souvenir booklet linked to *A Textile Dynasty*, the Tapestry Works exhibition.

A large scale research project, in collaboration with the Public Catalogue Foundation (PCF), will mean that the approximately 1500 oil paintings in Wirral's collection will be fully illustrated in colour and form the largest part of the first Merseyside volume of *Oil Paintings in Public Collections* when it is published in the next 12 months. These paintings were photographed and they will be available on-line via the PCF website in due course. Some of these are already available on the website, The National Inventory of Continental European Paintings.

## **5. EXHIBITIONS**

The prime purpose of the Museums Service is to preserve and exhibit the collections in its care. In addition, a regular and varied exhibition programme both uses and complements the collection displays. It is the mixture of unique items in the collection and the changing exhibitions that brings in regular visitors. The exhibition programme embraces work by local artists, one of the most important exhibitions being the annual Wirral Spring Exhibition of Art & Photography, from which the gallery makes purchases for the permanent collection. This open exhibition gives all local people the opportunity to have their work shown, provided it meets certain quality standards, but in addition the Wirral Society of Arts, Oxtou Artists and Wirral Art School are regular collaborators, and other organisations like Wallasey Amateur Photographic Society occasional ones. Solo exhibitions by selected artists intersperse the group shows and local history, archaeology and social subjects complete the variety of the programme. Collaborations with National Museums Liverpool (NML), the Museums

Service of Cheshire West & Chester and Galleries outside Liverpool are regular and frequent.

Particular successes in recent years include *A Textile Dynasty: Arthur H Lee & Sons, Birkenhead*, which won the National Museums & Heritage Award in 2010 as the Industry's Favourite, and *Above the Clouds: Mallory & Irvine and the Quest for Everest*, which was Highly Commended in the Project on a Limited Budget section of the same national awards. For the A.H Lee & Sons exhibition the gallery was in receipt of substantial additional funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Esme Fairbairn Foundation.

Ongoing is an exhibition project involving the Williamson Art Gallery and both the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, and the National Museum in Gdansk, Poland, to show work by Albert Lipczynski who was a prominent Merseyside artist in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and further close collaborations, particularly with NML, are planned for the future, most notably a survey exhibition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Liverpool School of Artists, as the Williamson and the Walker Art Galleries hold good complimentary collections and would be the principal lenders.

## **6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND USERS**

### **Formal learning**

Following the retirement of the Education Officer in June 2010 there has been an opportunity to reappraise the requirements of education within the Museums Service. The previous post-holder successfully coordinated a series of tours and school visits over 15 years, especially employing services from Wirral Transport Museum which were subsidised to encourage the participation of local schools. The changes prompted by the Strategic Asset Review mean that some sites and services are no longer available and the service will be refocused on the Williamson Art Gallery and the Priory. School visitor numbers have declined over the last 10 years from approximately 8000 per year to less than 4000, owing to changes in curriculum and school priorities, as well as depletion of the service offered to schools.

As a result of a management review, the Education Officer role has been redefined and split into 2 part-time posts with complementary emphases. The first of the new Learning Officers will be a Secondary education art specialist who will be expected to develop and deliver cross-curricular and key/functional skills programmes. The second, a Primary education specialist who will be expected to develop cross-curricular and key/functional skills programmes, and to respond proactively to the topic work undertaken in neighbourhood schools. There will be an initial focus on schools that will not experience transport difficulties in travelling to the Museums Service sites, by being close enough to walk, willing to use public transport or being able to access funding to facilitate bus transport.

### **Informal learning**

Over recent years the Museums Service has begun to develop more informal learning activities. Tours and visits for adult groups across the sites, most popularly including transport opportunities, were coordinated by the Education Officer in addition to involvement from other staff for more specialist groups. The Principal

Museums Officer (Principal Curator) has regularly been available to give talks both within and outside the museums buildings, including contributing to an occasional Sunday afternoon lecture programme hosted by the Friends of the Williamson Art Gallery & Wirral Museums.

A free Saturday morning Art Club has been running very successfully for a number of years. However, this has been funded by the Friends of the Williamson Art Gallery & Wirral Museums since a project grant ceased and it has proved unsustainable. The Club has not started again in the 2010/11 academic year. Coincidentally, this break has come at a convenient time given the review, as the sessions would benefit from being reassessed and their future sustainability considered.

Over and above the Saturday morning Art Club, a volunteer has begun running a monthly family fun day at the gallery, under the *VIDA* charitable banner, which began with an exhibition dedicated to a young Tranmere artist, Emma Burrows, who died a few years ago. The Service is keen to continue this offer and is supporting the volunteer with other initiatives.

In addition, a five-week Summer Holiday children's project has run for the last 10 years, supported by the Friends, and in recent years by the Wirral Methodist Housing Association. This has proved very successful and has each year been followed by an exhibition of work, which has often featured in the WMHA Annual Report. In 2009, for the first time, a small adult's project was added for WMHA residents.

Staff and artists that are contracted regularly have been given training in disability awareness as the Service attempts to make our universal offer more inclusive. This is being supported by bids to Aiming High for Disabled Children. So far, finance has been secured to pilot Family Fun Days targeted at families with disabled children. In addition a capital bid to provide height adjustable tables and other more inclusive equipment has been secured. Staff are also working with Aiming High for Disabled Children to provide more training on communications strategies for engaging with children and young people with learning and emotional difficulties.

Finally, there has been a development of young people's activities within the Gallery and the Priory. These include trails and colouring in sheets but it is the intention to continue to expand these resources as appropriate to each site. For example, jigsaws for the gallery and outdoor building blocks for the Priory. To support this development we have initiated a childminders' focus group to inform the development of other materials and encourage childminders to use the Museums Service sites more regularly.

### **Links with Initial Teacher Training Providers**

The Service Development Manager (Participation and Engagement Manager) has been developing links with Initial Teacher Training providers to develop learning outside the classroom placements and promote the Museum sites as learning destinations for the trainee teachers to inform their future practice. This will continue to develop, embedding the current pilot projects and making links with other providers. At the moment we have links with Chester University BEd programme and Liverpool Hope Performing Arts PGCE.

## **Retail and catering**

There have been discussions for many years about catering provision at the Williamson. During exceptional exhibitions, drawing more than usual visitors from outside the locality, a temporary café has previously been set up and for up to 10 years there had been a coin operated drinks machine, provided by the Friends, which was not particularly successful.

This year the Friends bought a good quality drinks machine, to be operated by staff, café-style tables and chairs and display units for pre-packaged cakes and biscuits. This has already proved its worth and the capital investment will enable us to expand this service. There are currently no plans to provide a catering offer at the Priory. Catering for meetings and pre-arranged groups is, however, made available at both sites.

Both the Williamson and the Priory currently carry a small stock of for-sale items; although the Priory's range is more limited than the Gallery's, both offer site-branded pocket-money ranges. In addition the gallery offers books, postcards and some higher priced items. The Priory has a short guide to the site available for purchase, but as part of the site improvements it is anticipated a colour souvenir brochure will be designed. Most of the exhibitions at the Williamson have catalogues available to buy, and where appropriate the gallery sources relevant books to offer for sale. The capital investment at the gallery will enable us to improve our retail offer at this site.

## **Marketing & Promotion**

The publicity generated by the Museums Service has built over the years but is still generally reactive and requires greater coordination. For the five years or so up to 2010 a regular 6-monthly Forthcoming Exhibitions leaflet has been produced for distribution through local and regional venues. Specific exhibitions or events have been promoted by means of advertisements in the Wirral Globe or Wirral Champion, or occasionally other more specialised publications (a large, externally-funded campaign was devised to promote *The Tapestry Makers* exhibition) and posters produced for selected events from the programme.

A major element of modern promotion is done over the Internet (see below, Utilising new technology...) but print sources, especially local press, remain a valuable way of communicating with the immediate constituency. Efforts should be made to renew a relationship with the press for editorial inclusions and paid-for advertisements should continue. Inclusion of information in listings, both local and national and both print and on-line, is a potential area for development, with the acknowledgement that research of the most appropriate avenues and maintenance of a regular up to date stream of information is often difficult and time-consuming.

The publicity and notice generated incidentally by two successes at the 2010 Museums & Heritage Awards, and experience from other parts of the service (Floral Pavilion, New Brighton) show the benefits that can accrue from such achievements. They also give the opportunity to promote to a rather different market, the 'industry' itself, and enhance the reputation of Wirral as an outstanding borough outside the immediate local area.

Building development and reappraisal of priorities give an additional opportunity to rebrand the Museums Service and promote the new services and facilities available at both Museums Service sites. Working with the Arts and Museums Service Communications Team we will work to develop and implement bespoke marketing campaigns for the two sites:

- Develop an active web presence for the Museums Service and all it offers.
- Make better use of 'free' marketing opportunities presented by specialised and news web listings, social networking sites etc.
- Identify and apply for awards every year.
- Write and submit articles to the relevant journals and websites to promote the work being developed by staff.
- Utilise box office software available through the Floral Pavilion to gain a greater understanding of our audience members, their patterns of attendance, merchandise they buy and so on.

## **Utilising new technology for interpretation and engagement**

### **Off-site**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century it is increasingly important to have a substantial internet presence, as more people are deriving their information from this source. Museum collections are of interest to people across the world, as shown by the lending of objects for international exhibitions, but the organisation of loans or travelling is not possible for everyone. Remote access to museum collections and exhibitions gives a profile not achievable by other means and is a very cost effective and efficient way of distributing information and raising awareness.

At present, the Museums Service is seen in a couple of pages of the Wirral Council website and [visitwirral.com](http://visitwirral.com), which provide basic information about the buildings and access. There is no provision for making this presence dynamic by giving up-to-date event, exhibition or display information, or for giving greater depth to the information provided. There is an aspiration, with the helpful cooperation of the Finance Department, to improve that by giving illustrated pages detailing collections and ultimately giving access to databases of collections. New documentation software will allow this type of access for research.

There is a Facebook page in the name of The Friends of the Williamson which has 226 followers and this type of visitor interaction is envisaged as an important route for the future, though its time-consuming nature will need to be balanced with the advantages of being involved.

### **On-site**

The rapid developments in new technology, particularly Smartphones and other mobile internet-accessible devices, have created opportunities for interpretation and engagement, already in use in some local schools.

Developments in technology enable visitors to access text and pictures, audio and video through their own mobile devices or on handsets provided by schools or the Museums Service. In addition, schools or museums staff can develop interactive activities on site that can then be uploaded to a website for access when they return

to school. The Museums Service can provide additional and supporting information on the website. One such provider already used in some Wirral schools and City Learning Centres is [www.wildknowledge.co.uk](http://www.wildknowledge.co.uk).

This would potentially enable the Museums Service to provide self-guided tours at the sites, including much more detail than can be provided on a picture label, for example curator talks or video streams of the production process. We could also provide images of artefacts not usually displayed for conservation reasons. The technology would be particularly useful at Birkenhead Priory where the location of interpretation panels is problematic as the site is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and all the buildings are Listed by English Heritage.

It should be noted that website developments and provision of information for devices such as these are very time-consuming and require substantial knowledge to offer details at the right level.

## **Users**

Visitors to the gallery have not been analysed in detail recently, although visitor figures are reported periodically as performance indicators. A small postcode survey conducted in Summer 2010 confirmed the results of the last survey several years ago, showing that 80-85% of visitors came from within 10 miles. However, it is believed that the profile of the Williamson has been enhanced in recent years and a larger sample will reveal that the constituency is now rather larger. The Williamson regularly draws between 33000 and 38000 visitors a year; the Priory between 14000 and 17000.

In 2006 Wirral Council's Citizen's Panel provided information directly related to museums. Four in ten (40.6%) of respondents said they visited the Williamson Art Gallery occasionally and nearly 9 in 10 (88.4%) of respondents were very or fairly satisfied. When the National Indicator on museums attendance (NI10) was collected Wirral had the highest participation rate of any Unitary Authority and the highest participation rate outside London.

Since the 1970's the Williamson Art Gallery & Museum has operated as an arts centre; the purchase of a Steinway grand piano, with Arts Council support, allowed concert performances to take place in a gallery ambience, which continue to prove popular, especially in the free Sunday Serenades series organised by the Friends of the Williamson Art Gallery & Wirral Museums for past 25 years.

The gallery is currently used regularly by a large range of groups from the Wirral Society of Arts, NADFAS (National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Society) and U3A (University of the Third Age), to Oxton Floral Art Club and Birkenhead History Society. In addition, space at both the gallery and the Priory are hired out for meetings and events.

The gallery works closely with Wirral Metropolitan College and the students from the Fine Art Degree course of Wirral Art School have the unique opportunity to exhibit their final degree shows in a public gallery. Each year the gallery also hosts a Fellowship exhibition with work from recent graduates.

## **7. STRATEGIC AIMS:**

### **Long term strategic aim for Williamson Art Gallery & Museum:**

- by 2020 Williamson Art Gallery & Museum will be of an equal and complementary standing and profile as Lady Lever Art Gallery, the National Museums Liverpool site in Wirral.

### **Long term strategic aim for Birkenhead Priory & St. Mary's Tower:**

- by 2020 Birkenhead Priory & St. Mary's Tower will no longer be on the Buildings at Risk Register and the fabric of the site will be properly maintained and conserved to preserve it for future generations.

### **Medium term strategic aims for the Museums Service:**

In the next five years the Museums Service will:

- increase levels of engagement over both sites,
- be a key community hub embedded in its local neighbourhood,
- be a vibrant cultural resource enjoyed and valued by Wirral residents and visitors to the borough,
- be a widely recognised regional heritage asset and a key player in Wirral's tourism and day visitor offer.

### **Underpinning objectives:**

1. Restructure the staffing of the Museums Service to maximise the use of the skills and talents within the Service:

- Better use of the creative and retail talent within the staff team
- Free up time for the professional museum staff to concentrate on developing the collections and their use in learning and exhibitions programmes. This will be achieved by revising and reallocating responsibility for some of the operational functions of the Museums Service to other staff team members.
- Enhance the workforce by utilising internships, apprenticeships etc when they are available.
- Actively seek external funding to enhance the staff team with a range of engagement staff targeting different communities. Additional engagement staff could potentially include:
  - Community Exhibitions Officer  
A curator with experience of working with community groups to develop exhibitions using the communities' own resources or responding to specific community interests with exhibitions from the Museums collections.
  - Vulnerable Children and Young People Engagement Officer  
An artist to work specifically with vulnerable children and young people offering art workshops inspired by items from the collections.
  - Elders Engagement Officer  
A crafts worker to work with elders, particularly those that are isolated or vulnerable, running craft workshops drawing their inspiration from the collections.



- Family Engagement Officer  
To work with families in the local neighbourhoods of the two sites who would not normally visit to encourage them to see the Museums buildings as a resource and safe space they can use.
- Community Outreach Officer  
To work with community groups who do not see the traditional heritage resources and assets as relevant but want to celebrate their own heritage and traditions.
- Volunteer Development Officer  
To maximise the wealth of talent and experience that is available through volunteers to benefit both the Museums Service and the volunteers.

The work of the Engagement staff would be evaluated using a number of measures to demonstrate the Museums Services' ability to support the work of other sectors, for example mental health, in an effective and cost efficient manner.

2. Develop strategic partnerships with schools local to the sites to provide cross-curricular support and encourage frequent visits:

- Develop programmes that support key/functional skill development across the year groups. These programmes need to be incremental so young people do not repeat an activity that has been 'tweaked' to fit both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, for example.
- Work with teaching staff to support topic work at Primary level, and the Creative Curriculum at Secondary, focusing on non-traditional subject areas eg Science (the science of thermo-chromatic paint and how do potters cope?) or Geography (why was the headland on which the Priory was built so strategically important?).
- Improve planning so that schools can be informed of interesting temporary exhibitions in the future that might support topic work.

3. Working with the Arts and Museums Service Communications Team to develop and implement bespoke marketing campaigns for the two sites:

- Develop an active web presence for the Service and all it offers
- Make better use of 'free' marketing opportunities presented by specialised and news web listings, social networking sites etc.
- Identify and apply for awards every year.
- Write and submit articles to the relevant journals and websites to promote the work being developed by the staff.

4. Work with Higher Education Institutions to develop a programme of student placements that support the work of the Museums Service whilst providing valuable, 'real' work experience for the students.

These may include:

- regular visitor surveys undertaken and analysed by the students.
- an internship for undergraduate Museums Studies students.
- research projects to assess the market potential and determine an appropriate course of action to sell programmes of work to schools beyond Wirral's boundaries.
- learning packs to illustrate key stories of the Priory.

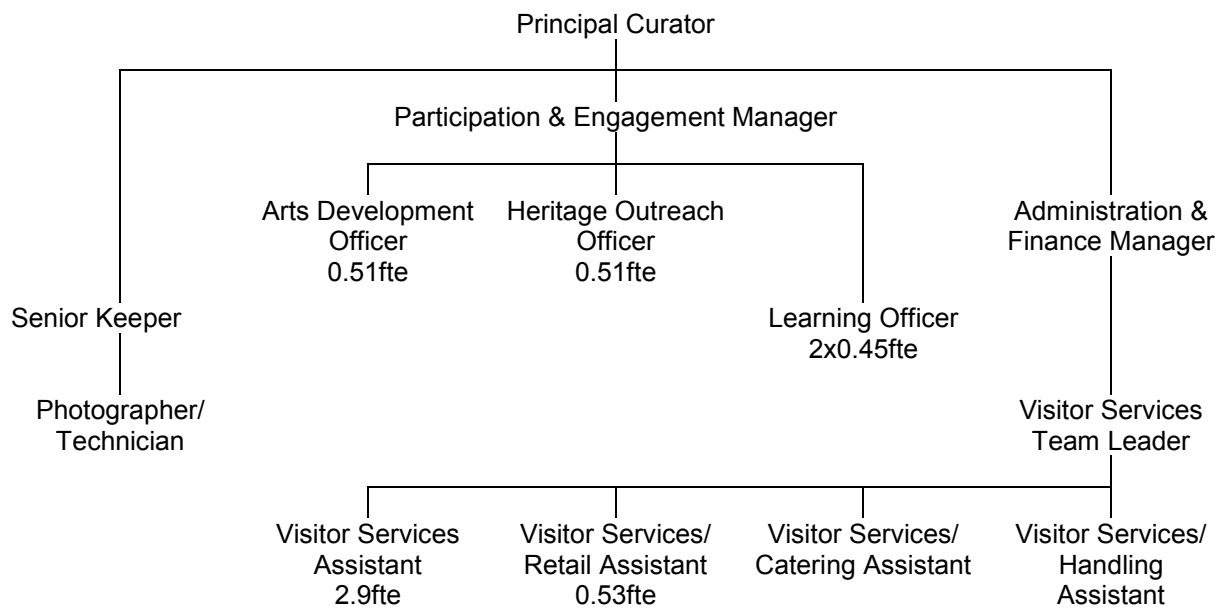
- scripts for use with schools to bring stories to life.
5. Identify potential partners in the local area with whom to develop relationships and projects that encourage non-traditional users into the gallery. Target groups could include:
    - isolated elders
    - young mothers
    - young carers
    - full-time carers
    - children and young people from areas of multiple deprivation.
  6. Develop the retail offer at Williamson Art Gallery so that it gains a reputation for selling good quality local arts and crafts. Working with a collection of local artists we will develop a range of local artists' and craft-workers' work combined with work commissioned specifically for the Museums Service.
  7. Develop informal learning opportunities across both sites, building on initiatives already taken. These to include a range of activities from children's worksheets which can be picked up on casual visits, to an events programme with focused historical, collection and exhibition talks linking directly to the Museums.
  8. Purchase MODES documentation software, install and train staff to operate, and clear documentation backlog. This will include the recruiting of temporary to support the current staff team and increase capacity to enable to achieve our targets.
  9. Complete retrospective documentation using software, so that complete collection is recorded in the same way. At this stage it is our intention to achieve this within existing resources.
  10. Update valuation of Museum collection, with especial reference to the Fine Art collection, in the light of recent documentation. The Fine Art collection is the volatile of our collections as it is subject market pressures and the dictates of fashion.
  11. Develop exhibition in collaboration with National Museums Liverpool and other partners of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Liverpool School of Artists. This builds on previous project partnerships with NML, most recently the development of two exhibitions - *Art in Revolution* and *Albert Lipeczinski*, - with the National Museum in Gdansk.

## **8. BUDGET INFORMATION**

It is the intention of the Service to reprofile the budgets to reflect the needs of the business once budget information has been agreed by Council.

## **9. STAFFING INFORMATION**

The proposed staffing structure, below, can be achieved within the budget adjusted to account for Early Voluntary Retirement losses.



## 10. CURRENT SWOT ANALYSIS

<p><b>STRENGTHS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £2m capital investment across both sites</li> <li>• WAG: purpose-built gallery</li> <li>• Large gallery spaces</li> <li>• Priory: oldest standing building on Merseyside – ‘a gem’</li> <li>• Loyal core audience</li> <li>• Friends group</li> <li>• Good relationships with local primary schools</li> </ul> <p>STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeat visits by local primary schools</li> <li>• VAQAS accreditation for both sites</li> <li>• MLA accreditation for both sites</li> <li>• Parking on both sites</li> <li>• Important permanent collections</li> <li>• Existing relationships with regional museums services</li> </ul>	<p><b>WEAKNESSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Much of collection in need of conservation</li> <li>• Shortage of professional staff</li> <li>• Lack of revenue</li> <li>• Staff capacity</li> <li>• Developmentally passive Friends group</li> <li>• Reduction in training budget</li> <li>• Accessioning backlog</li> </ul> <p>WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor building maintenance</li> <li>• Poor environmental control</li> </ul>
<p><b>OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnerships with NML</li> <li>• Partnerships with sub-regional and regional Higher Educational Institutions</li> <li>• Changing primary curriculum</li> <li>• Changed secondary curriculum</li> <li>• Partnerships with local secondary schools</li> </ul>	<p><b>THREATS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduction in staff making current provision or future development unachievable</li> <li>• Budget reductions</li> <li>• Deterioration of collections owing to inadequate conservation</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved catering and retail provision at WAG</li> <li>• Job market means that more museum graduates will be looking for work experience/volunteer opportunities</li> <li>• The work of the Heritage Outreach Officer and Arts Development Officer developing new audiences</li> <li>• Working with the Borough's Childminders to develop new audiences</li> <li>• External funding for engagement/development</li> <li>• Developing family offer</li> </ul>	
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## 11. RISK ASSESSMENT

<b>RISK</b>	<b>IMPACT</b>	<b>LIKELIHOOD</b>
On-going destabilisation of the budget	Undermining forward planning ability and implementation	Medium
Loss of necessary skills and experience through EVR/severance	Undermining the ability of the Service to deliver Council objectives	High
Unsustainable staff losses	Significant reduction in opening hours	High
Risk	Impact	Likelihood
Failure to secure external funding	The loss of opportunity to more widely engage with the public and develop relationships with non-traditional users	Medium
Obstruction in developing an appropriate staff structure	Inability to create a staff team that can take the Museums Service forward	Medium