



TOURISM, COMMUNITIES, CULTURE & LEISURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 3 March 2021

REPORT TITLE:	WIRRAL MUSEUMS SERVICE STRATEGIC PLAN
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

REPORT SUMMARY

This report outlines the proposed strategic direction for Wirral Museums Service and updates the committee on the progress of two Capital Programme funded projects.

The service plan for Wirral Museums Service builds on the achievements of the Wirral 2020 plan, creating more opportunities for our residents, regardless of age or income, to enjoy cultural events and supporting the tourism offer through programming of good quality exhibitions and events.

This matter affects all Wards within the Borough.

This is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Tourism, Communities, Culture and Leisure Committee is recommended to :

- (1) note and endorse the plans and aspirations of Wirral Museums Service in the context of the Wirral 2020 Pledges and the emerging Wirral 2025 plan,
- (2) support the exploration of opportunities for developments at Birkenhead Priory offered by the investment from central Government.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 To maintain Accredited Museum Status the accompanying Service Plan requires endorsement by this Committee. Endorsing the Service Plan demonstrates that the plan will meet the needs of Wirral residents.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 If this plan is not endorsed, an alternative plan would need to be developed. This option is unlikely because the proposed plan builds on previous success and reflects the learning through Covid of the value of digital engagement. The plan outlines approaches to ensure that Wirral Museums Service is supporting the most vulnerable in the borough.
- 2.2 If we do nothing Williamson Art Gallery & Museum and Birkenhead Priory will lose their Accredited Museum status, which would exclude Wirral Museums Service from significant national funding streams. It would also make borrowing pieces from other museums more difficult and make the Gallery less attractive as a venue for temporary exhibitions.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Wirral Museums Service is responsible for the management and operation of Williamson Art Gallery & Museum and Birkenhead Priory. In addition, the legal responsibility and some budget is held by the Service for the Wirral Transport Museum and Birkenhead Heritage Tramway.

Birkenhead Priory is the oldest standing building on Wirral and on Merseyside. The oldest building on the site, the Chapter House, dates to about 1150. The site is a Scheduled Monument, giving it protections similar to Stonehenge, with Grade I, II* and II Listed Buildings. The Museums Service manages the whole site as a visitor destination, working with key stakeholders to create an animated and interesting visitor experience. The Chapter House is owned by the Diocese of Chester and houses an active chapel, part of the Priory Parish. In the Scriptorium, above the Chapel, the Friends of HMS Conway volunteers have a museum and hold commemorative events there.

There is a small museum in the Undercroft, an events/exhibition space in the Refectory, and the remains of the guest hall and cloister precinct. The tower from the first parish church of Birkenhead, St Mary's, offers spectacular views over the Mersey and as far as Bidston windmill and Frodsham to the south. The 1939 sinking of the Cammell Laird-built submarine, Thetis, is commemorated within the tower with a plaque naming each man who lost his life by each of the 101 steps of the Tower.

We have an active and engaged group of volunteers who lead guided tours and help care for the grounds. The site is the venue for touring theatre productions, art installations, school visits, concerts and fairs. The church is active with prayer vigils and regular services.

3.2 **Williamson Art Gallery & Museum** is a Grade II purpose-built gallery and museum, opened in 1928, on the ward boundary between Oxton and Claughton. The gallery stores the majority of Wirral's varied art and historic museum collections. These include the largest public collection Della Robbia Pottery, made in Birkenhead, in the world; local artists including the internationally important Philip Wilson Steer; a reference collection of British watercolourists from 1750 to 1920 including five by JMW Turner; the design archive of Birkenhead company A H Lee and Sons who provided soft furnishings for the first class accommodation on Cunard liners; ship models from the Alabama to a modern gas platform and many from Cammell Lairds; furniture from Arrowe Hall and more.

The exhibition programme includes nationally and internationally recognised artists such as Henry Moore and Christian Furr, as well as local artists such as Steve des Landes. The team works with local practitioners to support the development of exhibitions, host Wirral Met College degree shows each year and have an annual open art and photography exhibition.

The Gallery hosts art classes, lectures, music concerts, meetings, family workshops, school visits. The Gallery shop carried the work of 64 local artists and makers and housed four small businesses.

In 2019 the service commenced a Capital Programme funded project to digitise our collections and documentation so that more information could be made easily accessible and available to the public. This project has been supported by volunteers. The digitised collections and associated documentation will be held on a searchable database. An example of how this could work can be found at the Ashmolean Museum, click <https://collections.ashmolean.org/> to explore their collections online.

In recent years the Williamson has received approximately £1.5m investment from the Capital Programme. This investment has improved the offer for visitors and stakeholders and has delivered:

- additional office and storage space enabling us to bring closed galleries back into use,
- new lighting to reduce power consumption and solar panels to support the Council response to the Climate Emergency,
- a new roof,
- a reconfigured entrance hall,
- a café.

3.3 **Wirral Transport Museum & Heritage Tramway** is operated by volunteers from Merseyside Tramway Preservation Society. The Museums Service has collections on the site in Taylor Street, Birkenhead. The building is in council-ownership and

there is a small budget associated with it that is intended to cover utility and insurance costs.

The operation of the tramway is determined by an Act of Parliament, Wirral Tramway Light Railway Order 1994, and there are very specific roles and requirements that need to be fulfilled under the terms of the Act. This includes the restriction that the tramway cannot be used as 'people-mover'.

Wirral Transport Museum and Birkenhead Heritage Tramway have been identified as a potential community asset transfer, although the Council will have to retain the legal responsibility for the operation of the tramway. There are items from Wirral's museum collections in the Transport Museum.

The **Williamson & Priory Friends** are a Charitable Incorporated Organisation that supports the work of the Museums Service. They do this in a number of ways, including:

- paying the fee for a freelance Publicity Officer
- funding the Summer Art Programme
- funding the Sunday Serenade concert series
- covering hospitality expenses for exhibition private views
- helping with the purchase items for the collection.

In the last few years, the Friends raised over £45,000 to turn an unused quadrangle in the centre of the building into a garden.

3.4 **SERVICE PLAN**

The Museums Service has begun to process of developing a new five year plan, Appendix 2. Below are the mission statements for each site and the 2030 vision. Strategic objectives can be found in draft plan.

3.5 **Birkenhead Priory**

Mission Statement

Birkenhead Priory will tell the story of the Christian heritage of the site and the history of faith practice in Wirral; teach visitors about the history of Birkenhead; tend the site and its buildings to preserve them for future generations; transform the visitor experience by providing opportunities for contemplation and reflection; and treasure the environment by promoting sustainable living.

2030 Vision

Our ambition is to enhance the programme of events, exhibitions and commissions, create opportunities for personal reflection and contemplation; look back to the history of the site, its town and the changing religious practice across Wirral; promote sustainable living and respect for the environment. This will be achieved within the constraints of the site as a Scheduled Monument with Listed Buildings, protecting the site for future generations.

3.6 **Williamson Art Gallery & Museum**

Mission Statement

Williamson Art Gallery & Museum will show the best of Wirral's historic and contemporary artists and makers; celebrate Wirral's history and create high quality cultural experiences for residents and visitors. We will be relevant to, and engaged with, all of Wirral's communities and be a vibrant part of Wirral's day-to-day life and its tourism offer, bringing a range of exhibitions and events to its unique spaces.

2030 Vision

During the next decade, the Williamson will expand its role as a vibrant community cultural hub using the art and museum collections to empower Wirral's communities. Staff time and expertise will be used proactively to support and celebrate existing and emerging artists and makers of Wirral and its diaspora.

3.7 Wirral Transport Museum & Heritage Tramway

Mission Statement

Wirral Transport Museum will celebrate the pioneering place Birkenhead had in the development of public transport in Britain and reflect the history of public transport in the area. Vehicles will be kept in working order and restoration and conservation will take place in public view with an effort to pass skills to the next generation.

2030 Vision

By 2030 Wirral Transport Museum and Birkenhead Heritage Tramway will be operated by a third sector organisation, supported by the Council:

- to meet the requirements under law for the operation of a heritage tramway,
- by providing relevant museums' collections on long term loan,
- to provide advice and guidance on the care of these collections.

3.8 Supporting our children, young people and adults

One key aspect of the plan is the emerging internal partnerships with Children's and Adult Services, embedding Wirral Museums Service in the delivery of services for vulnerable children, young people and adults.

Wirral Museums Service will do this by offering activities, such as den building at the Priory and art workshops at the Gallery; creating digital content that we can take into care settings alongside handling collections; creating safe neutral spaces for social workers and other professionals to work with individuals or groups; co-create exhibitions from our collections with groups of residents, to tell their stories and respond to the needs of other council teams in the delivery of their services.

This is important because there is strong evidence that high quality cultural engagement is beneficial for positive mental health and it ensures that we, as a Service, are responding to the needs of those residents. This builds on a history of effective project work that has informed ways of working and future activity.

3.9 Central Government investment in Birkenhead and Wirral

Birkenhead has secured significant inward investment from central government in the form of the Town Deal. Birkenhead Priory, Wirral Transport Museum and the Heritage Tramway are integral to the plans for the waterfront of Birkenhead and the developing tourism infrastructure of the town.

The Williamson is a key asset in the cultural landscape of Wirral and an integral part of the visitor economy of Birkenhead and wider Wirral and the attraction of high quality inward investment.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 There are expected to be no financial implications arising from this report as the expenditure required for accreditation and consultation are contained within existing budgets.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no legal implications associated with this report.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

6.1 There are no additional resource requirements directly associated with this report.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

7.1 *Loss of Accreditation:* the loss of Accredited Museum Status would result in exclusion from key grant regimes and would be difficult to get back. An agreed service plan is a requirement of Accreditation.

7.2 *Non-statutory service:* as the financial situation worsens for the Council non-statutory services become increasingly vulnerable. A lack of service plan that demonstrates relevance and value would exacerbate this risk. Closure of the service does not deliver a full cost saving as the costs of storing the collections will incur significant costs over time, estimated at £200,000 in the first year and subsequent annual costs estimated at £100,000.

7.3 *Missed opportunities:* there is significant inward investment in Birkenhead in the next few years. An endorsed service plan, with clear and ambitious objectives, increases the chances of benefitting from those regeneration monies. Museums Service staff are in discussions with colleagues from Regeneration and Place about the opportunities presented by inward investment such as Town Deal and Levelling Up.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

8.1 To support the Accreditation process we will undertake a limited consultation on the proposed strategy with stakeholders. Written responses, evaluation forms and focus groups will be used. The feedback will inform the final plan which will be brought back to Committee for approval.

8.2 Stakeholders include, but are not limited to:

- staff
- local residents and neighbours
- visitors
- user groups eg U3A
- Williamson & Priory Friends
- other Council Teams
- partners
- key funders
- volunteers
- Wirral Metropolitan College
- local arts societies and studios
- elected members.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity.

9.2 An Equality Impact Assessment has been provided to support this report.

<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments>

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Increasing our outreach service and online offer will all serve to minimise emissions from car usage. Our libraries will all have cycle storage and water fountains.

10.2 Where possible we will invest in environmentally friendly solutions and designs when we modernise our buildings to reduce their carbon footprint.

10.3 As a result of the initiatives outlined above, the content and recommendations contained within this report are expected to reduce emissions of Greenhouse Gases.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: [Wirral Museums Service Outline Strategic Plan 2020-2025](#)

BACKGROUND PAPERS

[Museums Change Lives](#)

[Wirral Plan 2020](#)

[Museums Accreditation Scheme](#)

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Not applicable	Not applicable