



TOURISM, COMMUNITIES, CULTURE AND LEISURE COMMITTEE

THURSDAY 2 SEPTEMBER 2021

REPORT TITLE:	UPDATE ON PROGRESS & FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF WIRRAL MUSEUMS SERVICE
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

REPORT SUMMARY

On 3rd March 2021, members of this Committee endorsed the strategic service plan for the Wirral Museums Service in the context of the Wirral 2020 Pledges and the emerging Wirral Plan for 2021-2026. Furthermore, the Committee supported the opportunities for development at both the Williamson Art Gallery & Museum (WAG) and Birkenhead Priory in the context of any emerging funding opportunities from Central Government and in view of the strategic regeneration plans for Birkenhead.

The service plan for Wirral Museums Service seeks to create 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.

Since consideration of the Committee report presented on 3rd March 21, Wirral Museums Service has predominantly remained closed, due to COVID-19 guidance, the service is now permitted to open, working within local public health COVID guidance.

Survey work has found that due to the age and design of the Williamson Art Gallery in particular, there is no mechanical ventilation within the building, and existing natural ventilation systems are deemed to be insufficient to maintain a COVID safe operating environment without the continuation of reduced capacity.

This report details the challenges that have been, and are still being, faced and how the Service is responding. It re-iterates the proposed vision for 2030 for the Service and considers a future exercise around consultation and engagement with key stakeholders. The report outlines how Wirral Museums Service intends to support the delivery of Wirral's 2021-2026 Plan and ideas for engagement and income generation moving forward.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Tourism, Communities, Culture & Leisure Committee: notes the contents of this report and supports the ongoing work to increase high quality cultural engagement with Wirral Museums Service for residents and visitors.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 Wirral Museums Service is in the process of developing a sustainable business model that delivers wider relevance with the diverse communities of Wirral; supports residents to live active and healthy lives, helps children and young people to realise their potential for brighter futures and contributes to the vibrant visitor economy. The Service is working with colleagues from across the Council to embed culture and learning into the heart of our communities.
- 1.2 As part of the budget setting process the potential closure of Williamson Art Gallery & Museum was part of the Council budget consultation process. The Williamson Art Gallery & Museum received the third largest number of comments from that public budget consultation. In addition, a petition supporting the Gallery attracted over 13,000 signatures, including support from nationally recognised figures and people as far away as Australia.
- 1.3 The consultation for the Birkenhead Culture and Heritage Strategy to support the Town Investment plan for Birkenhead (as part of the Town Deal process) attracted a significant level of comments for Wirral Museums Service assets, despite the Williamson being outside the curtilage of the strategy.
- 1.4 This level of support demonstrates how much Wirral Museums Service is valued by Wirral's residents and beyond.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 Do nothing - this option has been discounted. The services provided by the Museums Service present an unparalleled opportunity to become vibrant community cultural hubs and spaces, using the power of art, museum collections, and heritage to empower Wirral's communities. Doing nothing would not realise these potential opportunities, would compromise its contribution to regeneration plans for Birkenhead and threaten the Museums Accreditation.

3.0 BACKGROUND

3.1 Supporting the delivery of the Wirral Plan 2021 – 2026

- 3.1.1 Wirral Museums Service will contribute to the development of an inclusive economy and support the outcomes of the Wirral Plan by:
- 3.1.2 Working with local artists and craftspeople *to maximise the potential of Wirral's creative enterprise sector as a driver for economic regeneration and community wealth building* by creating selling opportunities and supporting them to get their product to market.
- 3.1.3 Creating exciting programmes of events and exhibitions across our sites to contribute to the *delivery of an ambitious, high quality and inclusive culture events programme which impacts positively on civic pride and outcomes for residents as well as attracts visitors.*

3.1.4 Contributing to activity to *promote Wirral regionally, nationally and internationally as a world-class visitor destination which is rich in assets and experiences.*

3.1.5 Wirral Museums Service will support Wirral communities to live active and healthy lives by running programmes that *improve wellbeing, reduce loneliness and social isolation through increased neighbourhood and voluntary support and work with partners to promote wellbeing and improve positive mental health.*

3.2 **Wirral Museums Service draft 5-year plan**

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

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.

3.2.2 *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.

3.2.3 *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.

3.2.4 Supporting our children, young people and adults

To support the aspirations within the emerging Wirral plan document and our own contribution to population health, wellbeing and access to culture and heritage we are building and strengthening our internal partnerships

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.

We 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.

3.3 Stakeholder Consultation

3.3.1 The Museums Service needs to take a strategic, long-term approach to developing and transforming services to strengthen organisational and financial resilience. Decisions should be made based on an assessment of community need, aspirations, and the emerging opportunities presented by regeneration planning.

3.3.2 The Museums Service strives to support the Council's emerging target operating model where investment in preventative activities and services will reduce the requirement for more expensive and complex interventions further down the line, thus reducing the costs of children's, adults' and health services in the longer term. We are seeking the support of elected members as we aspire to create a model for the Museums Service that is affordable, modern, sustainable and relevant and will support the delivery of our corporate priorities.

3.3.3 Engagement will take place at a community level to build a further understanding of specific needs. The consultation will allow those consulted to give intelligent consideration and response; those consulted will be made aware of the factors that are of decisive relevance to any decision and adequate time will be given for consideration and response. This engagement will also be used to seek ideas and suggestions for partnership arrangements and opportunities and to develop a network

of national organisations, community leaders and influencers to collaborate with to increase engagement with the service.

3.3.4 The museums service is currently developing a strategy and forward planning approach that will support any future funding applications. Therefore, the consultation process will encompass key stakeholders as explained at the meeting in March 2021. The next planning round will be taken out for wider consultation, utilising the 'Have Your Say' platform.

3.3.5 The key stakeholder consultation for the current plan will be undertaken during the autumn of 2021 with the final draft of the plan submitted to this committee in Spring 2022. Key stakeholders include, but are not limited to:

Staff	Partners
Local residents and neighbours	Key funders
Visitors	Volunteers
User groups e.g. U3A	Wirral Metropolitan College
Williamson & Priory Friends	Local arts societies and studios
Other Council Teams	Elected members
Arts Council England (ACE)	National Lottery Heritage Fund

3.4 Service Restructure Progress

3.4.1 As part of the 2021/2022 budget setting process, the Museums Service offered opportunities to reduce staffing costs through a staff redesign and restructure accompanied by the release of resource through the Council's Early Voluntary Retirement scheme (EVR).

3.4.2 The restructure and subsequent staff consultation periods were prolonged, and eventually resolved in July 2021. Most of the contractual changes will be implemented in August 2021 and recruitment for new posts is ongoing.

3.5 Re-opening of services

3.5.1 Williamson Art Gallery & Museum re-opened to the public in early June. The work undertaken by the staff whilst the building has been closed is paying dividends with visitors commenting on how beautiful the galleries look. More importantly people feel safe:

"This was the first time I had visited a gallery since lockdown restrictions have been eased, and I felt it was a very COVID safe environment. The rooms are large and airy and there was plenty of fresh air circulating as doors were open and hand sanitiser was readily available. Masks are required to be worn and everybody in the gallery adhered to this rule, as well as the one-way system."

3.5.2 The Gallery has faced challenges with capacities in individual galleries being restricted because of the growing emphasis on ventilation and the lack of fresh air circulation.

Asset Management colleagues are working to implement improved systems and requirements and a long-term solution is expected to be in place by the end of the year to allow room capacities to increase to a sustainable level.

3.5.3 Birkenhead Priory re-opened in early August with restricted capacities and the volunteer programme on the site has restarted.

3.5.4 In July the Service welcomed two Kickstart work placements who will be working with us for six months. This is part of the Government scheme to support 16-24-year-olds to gain valuable work experience.

3.6 Income generation

3.6.1 The ongoing problems with ventilation are currently compromising the Museums Service's ability to generate income. In the pre-COVID environment, room hire fees made up a large proportion of earned income. Alternative income generation activities are being explored.

3.6.2 To support this work additional funding has been provided, via Covid finance, to improve the outdoor offer across both sites and to buy equipment to improve the quality of the digital offer. This is supporting Covid-safe service delivery.

3.6.3 Currently funding is being sought to commission online payment facilities which could grow the donations to the Service through contactless donation points and online donations associated with digital content.

3.6.4 Below is a summary of income generation plans for the Museums Service. Some of the ideas are about direct earnings, others are about increasing the economic activity of local creative practitioners which will indirectly benefit the service.

<p>GROW BACK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitors • Room hire • Shop sales • Fairs at Birkenhead Priory • Outdoor theatre at Priory • Weddings at Williamson • Children's theatre at Williamson • Adult courses • Book clubs • Life drawing • Concert programme • Family drop-ins • Volunteer programme 	<p>IN DEVELOPMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selling exhibitions for local artists • Evening events at Williamson • 'Meet the funders' seminars for local creatives • 'Getting to market' development sessions • Hot desk workspace • Improving accessibility to collections • Distinct digital offer for the Museums Service • The Museums as a Traded Service for schools • Digital offer for schools • Self-led resources for schools • Digital offer for care settings • 'My House of Memories' app content • 'Ageing well' cafes
<p>LOOKING FOR FUNDING</p>	<p>ASPIRATIONS</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website to facilitate online collection searches • Social History Curator to develop co-curated exhibitions • Engagement project with non-traditional audiences at Priory • New digital offer at Priory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieving Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation status • Tendering to deliver commissioned services to vulnerable children and adults • New lecture/performance space at Williamson • New Visitor Centre at Priory • Supporting 'Arts on Prescription'
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4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Any financial implications associated with the operation of the Museums Service will be addressed in budget workshops and future committee meetings.
- 4.2 Members are asked to note that visitor capacity issues within Museum buildings will continue to compromise financial income until the point at which pre-COVID levels of occupancy are restored. Notwithstanding, it may take some time to build back levels of pre-COVID income.
- 4.3 Appointments to the restructure undertaken to support cost savings have been delayed contributing to off-setting income losses. Alongside this is strict cost control to minimise expenditure.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no legal implications associated with this report.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT, 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 *Financial:* The Museums Service is a non-statutory service and consequently may be considered by any review as non-essential spending. A lack of service plan that demonstrates relevance and value could exacerbate this risk. Closure of the Museums Service does not deliver a full saving as storing collections would come at a significant cost, estimated at £200,000 in the first year and subsequent annual estimate of £100,000.
- 7.3 *Regeneration Impact:* 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. Loss of opportunities to capitalise on investment.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

8.1 Key stakeholders will be consulted on the draft plan as part of the development of a sustainable business model for Wirral Museums Service.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken for the draft strategy and will be reviewed in light of the consultations.

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

9.2 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. Increase participation and cultural activity within our venues ensuring income and activity levels are linked.

9.3 An equalities impact assessment will be carried out during the development of any future income generating opportunities

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Modernising our venues will reduce the environmental impact whilst investment will result in more attractive buildings which will enhance the local townscape. Keeping the cultural provision within local communities and increasing our outreach offer, will all serve to minimise emissions from car usage.

10.2 Where possible we will invest in environmentally friendly solutions and designs when we modernise our building, purchase new equipment to reduce our carbon footprint by supporting the outcomes of the Cool 2 climate change strategy for Wirral.

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 as set out in the Wirral Plan.

10.4 Wirral Museums Service is actively developing a distinct online and digital offer that supports those that cannot easily access our sites. This work also provides an alternative to an in person visit potentially reducing the number of car journeys visitors make each year.

REPORT AUTHOR:

Jo Burns

Museums Manager

Telephone: 01516663509

Email: joburns@wirral.gov.uk

BACKGROUND PAPERS

[Wirral Museums Service 2020-2025](#)

SUBJECT HISTORY

[Wirral Museums Report 3 March 2021](#)

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date