

Background/Resolutions from Previous Meetings

- 1 The Museums Fundamental Service Review (FSR) agreed at the meeting of Cabinet on 23rd August 2005 recommended that a new museum for the district, located in a town centre, be established. It was not prescriptive as to where it should be and what it should include as significant investment would be involved although substantial revenue savings were predicted. The lack of compliance with Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), poor display storage facilities and public toilet provision and limited ability to cater for school parties in the existing Museum buildings were seen as key limitations on the service, to be rectified when the new museum was established.
- 2 The savings envisaged bringing the Council's expenditure on this service more in line with authorities of similar size to be sustainable. The target was set at £125,000 reduction in the annual service budget in the medium to long term and would be achieved through efficiencies in building operating costs and removal of duplication of staffing (i.e. two museums sites moving to one). To date £24,130 has been delivered as a result of operational efficiencies.
- 3 The recommendation to move from two Museums to one was partly driven by the need to invest large sums of money into both the existing museums buildings to make them fit for purpose. This investment was considered uneconomical, and discounted by the FSR team.
- 4 The Service & Financial Planning process (2005/06) approved the saving of the running costs of the Council managing Hitchin Town Hall, as £58,000 in 2007/08 and thereafter. However as a decision on an application for external funding as part of a joint working proposal with Hitchin Initiative to manage the Town Hall was not being made until 31st March 2008, provision was made to continue the revenue support for the Town Hall for the full financial year 2008/09. The net working budget for covering the direct costs of operating Hitchin Town Hall in 2009/2010 has since increased to £76,460 per annum, and remains with NHDC.
- 5 A Project Board was established to develop a business case for the capital projects identified within the Museum improvement plan so initially worked on developing a business case for a new collections centre as a pre-cursor to consolidating two museums in to one.
- 6 However, at its meeting on 27th January 2009, Cabinet considered a report of the Heads of Community Development & Cultural Services and Financial Services which provided information on a proposal to change the timescale for the closure of a museum, envisaged by the Museums FSR, in order to provide additional potential efficiencies to help produce a balanced budget for 2009/10. This report also outlined the work undertaken to look at possible alternative sites and how Hitchin Town Hall site was identified as the preferred option for more detailed study.

At that meeting Cabinet resolved:

- (1) *'That Option 2, as outlined in the report, be adopted and the necessary changes in the implementation plan be made;*
- (2) *That, as part of this strategy, plans for closing Letchworth Museum by 31 March 2011 be agreed;*
- (3) *That this be accompanied by a change in the Capital Programme to accommodate the Museum Service, including the construction of a museum in a refurbished Hitchin Town Hall;*
- (4) *That, in view of the short time available in considering this matter, the Scrutiny Committee be offered the opportunity to scrutinise this decision prior to implementation'.*

Option 2, proposed the development of Hitchin Town Hall as a museum for North Herts and the deferral of the completion of a smaller collection centre than originally envisaged in the Service Improvement Plan. The proposal envisaged the main hall being converted in to a museum and the gymnasium being retained as a community venue.

- 7 Following Cabinet's decision, an initial feasibility study was commissioned from Cragg Management Services to establish 'proof of concept' and this paper was subsequently prepared for submission to the Council's Asset Management Group as a necessary stage in securing approval for capital expenditure and to help frame the terms of reference for a comprehensive feasibility study.
- 8 In considering the 'proof of concept' study Scrutiny Committee at its meeting of 18th May recommended to Cabinet:
 - (1) *That the Scrutiny Committee recognises the need to improve the Museums Service;*
 - (2) *That the Scrutiny Committee expresses concern at the lack of consultation;*
 - (3) *That the Museum Collection Service be separated from the public Museum Service and progressed separately;*
 - (4) *That future provision for current users of Hitchin Town Hall be addressed;*
 - (5) *That all external grant funding opportunities be pursued;*
 - (6) *That the need to address the problems of Museums, Hitchin Town Hall and a Museums Collections Service is acknowledged and further feasibility work is undertaken on all of these;*
 - (7) *That dialogue with all relevant bodies regarding museums is continued.*
- 9 Following this Cabinet at its meeting of the 19th May 2009 resolved:
 - (1) *That a full feasibility study be commissioned in order to ascertain the suitability or otherwise of the future use of Hitchin Town Hall as a North Hertfordshire Museum;*

- (2) *That the recommendations and views of the Scrutiny Committee and the public speakers at the meeting be taken into account as part of the work on the feasibility study.*

10 On 20th October 2009 Cabinet considered the completed feasibility study and in doing so resolved:

- (1) *That the findings set out in the report and Feasibility Study for conversion of Hitchin Town Hall into a new Museum be supported;*
- (2) *That the comments, views and recommendations of the public speakers, the Hitchin Committee, the Letchworth Committee and the Scrutiny Committee be noted.*

RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL:

- (1) *That the necessary financial and other resources necessary to progress the conversion of Hitchin Town Hall into a new Museum be put in place;*
- (2) *That, subject to this, the financial impact of delaying the closure of Letchworth Museum to coincide with the plans to open the new museum be quantified.*

11 Subsequently, at its meeting on 3rd December 2009, Council resolved to:

- (1) *That the findings set out in the Feasibility Study (Annexes 1 to 3) and the report be noted;*
- (2) *That the recommendation from Cabinet at its meeting held on 20 October 2009, as set out in the report, be noted;*
- (3) *That, before considering whether or not to progress this project, the whole matter be deferred to the next meeting of Council on 4 February 2010,* to allow proposals from community groups who have previously expressed interest to be submitted, examined and reported on;*
- (4) *That the closure of Letchworth Museum be delayed to coincide with the plans to open the new museum.*

[*Subsequently deferred to a special meeting of Council on 11th February 2010]

12 At the meeting of Council on 11th February 2010 Member considered an initial assessment of the proposal developed with the community groups to 'proof of concept' stage, a brief technical appraisal of the proposal in comparison to the original proposal considered in December 2009 and a request that Members provide direction on the next steps and resolved:

That the Community Group proposal, as detailed in the report, be explored further by commissioning a full feasibility study as indicated in Para 6.2, in order to enable a full comparison to the current preferred option and also allow the Community Group to prepare a business plan for the facility and present firm funding proposals. The above to be brought back to Council, via Cabinet, at

the first available opportunity after completion of the feasibility study, which is estimated to be 4 months.