

Arts, Museums & Heritage Forum Meeting, 28 April 2010

Over 80 people attended this meeting, held at 7.30pm in a packed ballroom of the Sun Hotel, Hitchin, and chaired by John Robinson, NHDC Strategic Director of Customer Services. Cllr. Tricia Cowley gave a brief overview of the museum development programme, and explained the background to the two different proposals for conversion of Hitchin Town Hall. Architect Neal Charlton then showed slides of both schemes, explaining the differences between them. Lynn Saville spoke about the NHDC ('Gym retained') proposal, and Keith Hoskins and John Creswell described the 'Hall retained' proposal, which is being championed by a consortium of community groups led by the Hitchin Initiative. The remainder of the meeting was open to questions from the floor, which are summarized below:

Q. If the Town Hall is converted, will you retain the museum store at Burymead?

A. Yes. The plan is to move the staff who are currently based at Burymead to the Town Hall, but additional storage will continue to be required. We will then be looking at the best way to meet the remaining storage needs in the future.

Q. Are Royston, Letchworth and Baldock Museums going to be closed to make a new District Museum?

A. No. Only the two museums actually run by North Hertfordshire District Council, Letchworth Museum and Hitchin Museum, will close. Their staff and collections will be amalgamated in the new museum, and we also intend to use the opportunity to display many of our collections currently in storage at Burymead. NHDC already supports other museums in the District (Hitchin British Schools, Ashwell Museum, Royston Museum, Baldock Museum), with financial assistance or professional help and advice.

Q. Will the building be air-conditioned?

A. No. The building designs are intended to be more energy-efficient, by using natural ventilation; for example by opening up the glazing in the gymnasium roof to let air in as necessary

Q. What about problems with noise?

A. Both schemes try to design this out. Using the space behind the stage as museum storage will provide a buffer between the main hall and the rear of the building, and arrangements for the use of the building will be required to show how this can be managed.

Q. You mentioned savings of £200,000. Where will this come from?

A. We are reviewing this currently, as part of the Business Plans which are being developed for both schemes. The savings identified will be made by only running one

building, the Town Hall, instead of three (Letchworth and Hitchin Museums, and the Town Hall). More detailed information of the savings can be found in the Council reports on the Museum Forum pages of the NHDC internet.

Q. You are talking about investing £3.4 million. On this level of expenditure there would be a depreciation charge of around £250K per annum. Will this be accounted for in your Business Plan?

A. Local authority accounting is slightly different from commercial accounting, so our Business Plan will be correspondingly different, however capital recharges are shown within the service cost figures. Although revenue savings are important the investment decision also recognises that this hall and the museums service will need investment to remain fit for their purpose.

Q. Why do we need to make the front entrance DDA compliant, when there is perfectly good level access at the side and rear of the building?

A. The Council has a duty to ensure equality for all its citizens. If someone in a wheelchair wanted to access the building via this entrance, and came in through the side door, they would have to negotiate their way through whatever was happening in the hall area, which is likely to be most inconvenient, especially if it is being used for events.

Q. The sprung floor is very important; will it be kept?

A. If the hall is retained, it would be necessary for it to have as many uses as possible to generate income, but any divisions of the space are planned to be done in such a way as to ensure there is no risk to the floor..

Q. Can we have a meeting to discuss the layout plans for the content of the new museum in more detail?

A. We're still at proof of building concept stage, so spending money on detailed plans currently for both schemes is not considered efficient. However NHDC will consult on the plans for museum displays after agreement to invest has been reached.

Q. If the building is listed, will it make a huge and expensive difference to the plans?

A. There shouldn't be too many problems as long as any development is done in an appropriate manner. Listing wouldn't necessarily mean additional cost, but it would mean adding additional time; a Listed Building application would take perhaps three months, and of course the cost savings would not be achieved for longer.

Q. Would any money from the sale of the existing museums buildings be put towards this project?

A. Resources from the sale of Council assets go into the general pot to fund investments such as this, however there are covenants on the museums which may limit their future usage, and value.

Q. I notice the proposed roof garden on both plans. Will the existing Physic Garden be dug up?

A. No.

Q. Is it right that even though there will be more museum space, not all the collections will be displayed?

A. Yes; no museum ever has everything on display, but we will have an opportunity to show far more than we do at the moment.

Q. Will there be a smoking area for the main hall?

A. No. It will also be illegal to smoke in the roof garden.

Q. If there are huge budget cuts after the election, will this scheme be cut?

A. It is impossible to know exactly what will happen, but this development is in the NHDC capital programme, which is currently less constrained than its revenue budget.

The meeting closed at 9pm.