



NORTH HERTS MUSEUM AND TOWN HALL

END PROJECT REPORT

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BACKGROUND

The Project Initiation Document sets out the background to this project, which commenced following a Best Value Review of the Museums Service in 2005. Following the review, the Council considered a number of different options for how to improve the way the Council operated museums. It was agreed that the Council would work with a local group (Hitchin Town Hall Ltd) and the Mountford Hall would be refurbished, and a new District Wide Museum would be constructed adjoining the Mountford Hall by reconfiguring the Workmans' Hall. The Town Hall and District Wide Museum project commenced late 2012.

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

This project has been well documented and therefore the detail of its delivery will not be repeated in this end of project report. The following links provide access to all Project Board documents and all key decisions: -

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/museums/museum-and-town-hall-project/project-board>

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/museums/museum-and-town-hall-project/hitchin-town-hall-museum-proposals>

An Overview and Scrutiny review also took place, which was chaired by an independent person and looked at how the Council worked with its partners during this project, to identify lessons learnt for future partner working relationships that the Council may undertake.

As part of the evidence gathering process for the review, the Council sought written witness statement submissions from individuals or organisations to address the following key areas:

- 1) What were the issues that arose with partners during the Project?
- 2) How did the Council and partners seek to resolve those issues?
- 3) How effective were those approaches?
- 4) What lessons can be learnt to improve future working relationships with partners?

The link below provides an overview of the review and the panels findings

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/museums/museum-and-town-hall-project/overview-and-scrutiny-review-hitchin-town-hall-and>

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

The Project Objectives were: -

- 1) To meet the needs of the existing customers
- 2) To offer better quality facilities to attract new users
- 3) To enable better display, storage and use of the collections
- 4) The improvements should increase the number of users of Hitchin Town Hall and the museum service and maintain and enhance their experience. This will be monitored through the Council's Customer Satisfaction Scheme
- 5) Invest to save project with an agreed target reduction of £125,000 per annum, on revenue expenditure

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Were the objectives achieved?

- 1) The facility has been fully open since July 2019 and based on the initial feedback it is believed that it does meet the needs of the existing customers who used to visit the Letchworth and Hitchin Museum. This is based on feedback from current users.
- 2) Data obtained from visitors demonstrate that the majority of users feel the quality of facility is significantly better than the Council's previous museums in Letchworth and Hitchin. Additionally, the new facility is attracting new users, which again can be evidenced from the data that is collected.
- 3) The new facility provides better ways of displaying the Council artefacts; however, the anticipated improvements for storage were not fully achieved. The rooms that are on site are better than the previous storage, but due to damp issues in the basement it was not possible to make improvement to this area. The cost of undertaking this work was in excess of £60k and there was no guarantee that by doing this the basement would meet the standard of environmental conditions to store museum artefacts. The other concern was by fully damp proofing the basement it could push water to other areas of the building which might be more difficult to manage. Therefore, it was agreed not to undertake this work and the issue of long-term storage requirements for the museum are being considered as a separate potential project.
- 4) Since the Museum has been fully opened (6 July 2019 to the end of November 2019, five months) a total of 16,846 people have visited the museum. To put this in comparison a total of 26,113 people visited Hitchin and Letchworth Museum in its last year of opening. This average as 2,176 visits per month. The new facility is currently averaging 3,370 visits a month. Although there is not a full year, the current usage indicates visitor numbers have increased.
- 5) The Town Hall usage has also increased; this is demonstrated by the significant increase in income that the facility now takes. The average income that was taken in the last three years of operation was £50k before it was refurbish (2010/11 - 2012/13). Last year (2018/19) the Town Hall took £112,814 and is estimated to take £133,000 this year (2019/20).
- 6) The initial aim was to reduce the revenue expenditure for museum services by £125,000 per annum. This year (2019/20) the anticipated reduction will be £150,360. Therefore, generating an additional £25k savings per annum.

LESSONS LEARNED

A lessons learned document has been completed and is provided in appendix A. To ensure the Council learns from this project this document will be presented to Contract and Procurement Group and discussed. The Council is also considering and discussing how the Council can learn from this project and incorporate early warning of potential issues into the Council's project management process. This will be reported to the March meeting of the Political Liaison Board.

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MEASUREMENT OF A PROJECT

The three key components for measuring any project are time, price and quality.

Time – the project took significantly longer than originally estimated. There were many factors that contributed to this and exception reports were produced to explain the reason for these. The main reason for the project delays were due to the Council and Hitchin Town Hall Ltd disagreeing, which meant the project could not progress as planned. The longest delay was due to the land dispute of 14 & 15 Brand Street, this meant the project and the opening of the entire facility was held up by over a year.

Price – at the point the Community Scheme, which involved retaining the Mountford Hall as a community venue and developing the gymnasium and an adjacent shop (14 Brand Street) for the Museum, was adopted by Council in October 2012, the required investment from NHDC was estimated to be £4.2million. When the final scheme, expanded to also include 15 Brand Street, was approved by the Council in October 2013, the cost of this project to NHDC was estimated to be £4.3m.

By the time the Museum and Town Hall facility opened fully in July 2019, the total Council investment was £6.0m. This total included the purchase of 14 & 15 Brand Street by NHDC for £567,000, £490,000 to pay for the capital contribution that Hitchin Town Hall Limited were due to pay and other costs incurred by the Council as it met the liabilities of Hitchin Town Hall Limited under the Development Agreement.

These additional costs were not originally budgeted for in the project, therefore, although costs have increased the starting budget and the actual spend was not like for like. Also the Council now has the operational responsibility of the Town Hall, which was originally Hitchin Town Hall Limited

Quality – following the opening of the North Hertfordshire Museum and Hitchin Town Hall the Council has received many positive comments from customers about the quality of the building and the museum exhibition.