

Report to Stronger Communities Select Committee

Date of meeting: 21 September 2021

Portfolio: Community and Regulatory Services

Subject: Museum Collections Project - Rationalisation

Officer contact for further information: Francesca Pellegrino (01992 564996)

Democratic Services Officer: Rebecca Perrin (01992 564243)



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

Epping Forest District Museum is currently undertaking a review of its collections to ensure material held remains relevant, accessible and safe for public and staff. This is a procedure recommended to be undertaken by all museums, and follows guidelines and ethics laid out by the Museums Association. This report outlines the process and reasons for this project as well as providing an update on project status.

Report:

1. Background to the project

Epping Forest District Museum's (EFDM) collections cover the breadth of local community history. Continuing to protect, collect and provide access to the district's local heritage is a fundamental part of supporting Epping Forest District Council's objectives in building a stronger place and communities.

Over the years, a broad collecting policy combined with limited documentation has led to much collecting of material, some of which is either not relevant or suitable for the museum and its audiences. The collection now totals over 100,000 objects held across 4 storage locations.

Like many museums, the collections have begun to exceed the space available for storage and this presents a risk to their future care, management and access. The main stores which are on site benefitted from a major Lottery funded capital redevelopment in 2016. Improvements included an environmentally controlled store and a 'public viewing' store. Whilst this is a major improvement, the redevelopment project did not address the collection documentation problems or the growing collections here onsite and in off-site storage. All are now at full capacity. In addition, the three off-site stores do not provide a sound environment for the collections held there. Some of the objects are stored very high up on shelves, boxes are collapsing, and there are objects obstructing aisles, making it increasingly difficult for staff and volunteers to access them properly and safely. This full capacity means that there is no expansion space to address gaps in the collection with material highlighted in the Collections Development Policy, to help ensure we continue to document the past and present for future generations.

The museum inherited extensive and poorly documented collections at its formation and historically lacked the resources to address the issue. Further collecting has added to the backlog leading to a situation where collections have grown without full records being created. Without this knowledge, it is impossible to provide a full or accurate public service.

Documentation and storage issues have meant that objects have been acquired which fall outside of the Museum's collecting policy or within the Epping Forest District. These issues

have also led to duplicate material being collected, some of which may not have any local stories or provenance linked to them.

Public and staff safety is also a concern. Packed, full collection stores combined with out-of-date or sub-standard documentation has meant that material exists within the stores which should be handled with safety and care, and up to date risk assessments should be in place. For example, the museum holds objects classed as hazardous such as asbestos, arsenic, firearms and controlled drugs. The Council must ensure it has thoroughly audited its collection and documentation in order to comply with Health & Safety regulations to ensure the Council knows exactly what is held, and that material is recorded and handled with due care. This project will enable these key issues to be addressed.

It should be noted that a process of historic over-collecting and issues with documentation is present in all museums, but the team at Epping Forest District Museum recognise the importance of addressing this pressing issue now by embarking upon a realistic rationalisation project across its collections, so that it remains relevant to the District's residents and visitors and engages and inspires generations across communities.

2. Guiding Principles

For this project the following guiding principles have been agreed and adopted:

1. The Museum abides by the Museums Association's Code of Ethics and disposals guidance which are the guiding principles for all museums. As an accredited museum, a regular audit and review of all process and procedures is undertaken to comply with industry standards.
2. The collection is owned by the district's residents, representing the generosity of past, and current donors, to tell the story of place and communities for the benefit of future generations.
3. The collection is established for the long term and each generation has responsibility to the next to ensure public collections remain sustainable.
4. It is imperative collections are used and developed in response to the needs of society and that they evolve. Museum collections should provide full opportunity for public **use** and **engagement**.
5. Disposal is an integral part of responsible collections management and will ensure that museums are fit for future generations.

3. Professional Project Support

The Museum has appointed Museum Consultant, Helen Giles, to develop plans for this project, provide support and undertake an evaluation report on completion. The Museum is in constant contact with the Essex Museum Development Officer, SHARE Museums East and The Museum Association to ensure every step of the project is undertaken correctly. Specialists are consulted on a regular basis when particular collections or types of items are being reviewed to ensure appropriate information is gathered.

Volunteers have been recruited and fully trained to support the project.

4. Project Process and Museum Association Guidelines



- Full audit of the collections.
- Gathers all documentation associated with the object and tracks key important information such as provenance, condition, historical importance, societal importance etc.
- Volunteers undertake research as part of this phase.



- A strict scoring regime is used.
- Consideration is taken as to items on loan, items may relate to other localities in the UK or items whose condition may pose a health and safety risk.
- Consultation takes place with specialists, other museums, wider team, local groups and donors.
- Once the items have been scored, the list goes to a steering committee (Cllr Mary Sartin, local groups, museum staff, specialists and volunteers) for discussion and sign off.
- The list is signed off by the Portfolio Holder and is opened up to other councillors.



- This phase follows the Museum Association strict code of ethics which is the governing body for museums.
- To ensure ethical removal there is a strict step by step process that must be followed. The core aim is that items remain in the public domain.
- **Process 1: DISPOSE OF MATERIAL HAZARDOUS/DAMAGED**
- **Process 2: RETURN OF LOANS TO DONORS**
- **Process 3: OFFER TO ACCREDITED MUSEUMS (2months)**
- **Process 4: OFFER TO NON ACCREDITED MUSEUMS/ PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS (1 month minimum)**
- **Process 5: FINAL DISPOSAL / DESTRUCTION (return to original owner, sale as scrap or gift to charity, or destruction as final resort)**

5. Project to date

North Weald Storage Location

- All items at the North Weald storage location (54) have been through phase 1 and phase 2.
- 47 of these items have been identified for removal from the collection because they do not meet the Collections Development Policy and have been signed off by the Steering Committee and via a formal Portfolio Holder Decision.
- 16 of these items have been removed due to being hazardous and posing a serious risk to health and safety. These items contained high levels of asbestos and guidance from the Museum Associated made it clear this is what was needed.
- 10 of these items have been transferred to the Community Culture and Wellbeing Team's community allotment projects.
- The remaining items are awaiting transfer to other museums or community groups, such as Copped Hall, who the Council is currently in contact with.

Store One at the Museum

- All items (1717 – this does not include archaeological items which are being reviewed separately) have been through phase 1 and 2 of the process.
- So far 123 of those items have been put forward and signed off by the Steering Committee and completed the Portfolio Holder decision process.
- These items are now going through phase 3 and are being advertised to museums – with direct contact made with relevant museums for specific items. For example, the Museum of Computing for the computers that have been identified.
- Further groups of items from store one will come forward to Steering Committee once the panel have finalised the scoring of these items.

Store Two at the museum

- Approximately 700 items have been through phase 1 of the process.

Store Three at the museum

- Approximately 150 items have been through phase 1 of the process.

Cr@te Storage Location

- Approximately 150 items have been through phase 1 of the process.

6. Project Success to Date

- The Museum is currently being recognised across the industry as undertaking a fully ethical and high standard project.
- Articles on the project have been featured in industry magazines, online web resources and the team has been asked to speak at various conferences.
- The team has uncovered some fantastic stories in the collection which would not have been discovered if the project was not undertaken.
- By undertaking the project the objects are already being stored and cared for better, the documentation and information about each object has improved which also, in turn, supports the current work to improve the Museum's documentation database and allows the collections to be made accessible online.
- The project has the full support of key groups including the Waltham Abbey Historical Society who supported the setup of the Museum in the first place.
- The audit has also highlighted objects and collections that require further work and support. So far a bid for £120,000 from Arts Council England has been made, to support work on the Museum's Ethnographic Collection – this project will help gather a better understanding of the collection and its important history, enable increased public engagement with the collection, support co-curation and projects with the communities

from which these objects originate and support the Museum to address issues around decolonisation. A further external funding bid will be submitted to the National Lottery Heritage Fund to support a partnership project with the Lea Valley Regional Park and Historic England on material relating to the Abbey Church.

- So far 10 new volunteers have been recruited for the project with a total of 19 volunteers currently supporting this project. To date, collections volunteers have contributed 556 hours working on this specific project, equating to nearly £5,500 investment into the district.

Reason for decision: To confirm, outline and update on the museum collection rationalisation project.

Options considered and rejected: Options include to retain all items currently held in the collections as current.

Resource implications: Within existing budget and staff resourcing.

Legal and Governance Implications: The Museum Association guidelines and Code of Ethics provide the industry standard for ensuring this project complies with procedures.

Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications: Through this project the resource and environmental impacts of managing collections across 4 different locations will be improved. Once complete the project will ensure safer access to collections for staff and the public. The project will also see a number of local groups and the community to benefit. Not only through better access to the collection itself but objects that are not reallocated to other museums will be offered to the community and local groups to support their work and projects.

Consultation Undertaken: A strict scoring process has been followed under the guidelines that are produced by the Museum Association. The list of items has been reviewed by a steering committee who have agreed the proposed decision. The Steering Committee consists of staff members who are not undertaking the project itself, Councillor Mary Sartin, a freelance museum consultant and where appropriate subject specialists, volunteers and community groups. Where appropriate, the person or persons who donated the items has been contacted and the Waltham Abbey Historical Society which provided a number of items for the collection has also been consulted. Once the list has been signed off by the steering committee the object and report undergo the Portfolio Holder Decision Process and allows wider councillors to review the decision. If the recommendation is approved – following Museum Association guidelines the items will first be offered to other accredited museums then follow the process of reallocation which includes a number of steps to ensure the items stay in the public domain – these steps are outlined in the above diagram.

Background Papers: Previous Portfolio Holder Decisions (February 2021 and June 2021)

Impact Assessments: Previous EIAs for Portfolio Holder Decisions (February 2021 and June 2021)

Risk Management: This project has been assessed as one of the council's high priority projects and a risk assessment has been undertaken. The key risks which have been assessed are:

- Not following the Museum Association guidelines for correct procedures for Rationalisation. This could lead to reputational damage; and
- Not undertaking proper consultation – this could also risk reputational damage.

These two risks have been properly assessed and all plans and guidelines for this project ensure that the risk has been mitigated. The project team are following a guided process to ensure the two risks above have been accounted for.

Equality: The project will enable the museum to ensure it represents diverse audiences and the district through time through its collection by uncovering stories about the objects currently in the collection but also making space to add to the collection and ensure the whole community, past, present and future, can be represented through the collections.