

Feedback from Member site visits for the CSC review of New Towns Heritage Centre to Colchester 15 Oct, Milton Keynes 22 Oct & informal meeting of the Committee Monday 25 October 2021

Members visited Colchester Firstsite Arts Gallery/Community hub and Colchester Castle Museum on Friday 15 October:

Feedback from Cllr Myla Arceno:

*Here are some points I made from the visit to Colchester:*

*I. What made the museum successful?*

*The museum fully embraces the beautiful diversity of Colchester. The inclusivity and diversity attract the community to get involved and contribute to the shows and event. The ideas are being drawn from the community of what they want for the museum. They have events for NHS and key workers, refugee action, religious group, people with disability and private groups.*

*From our experience that day - we were lucky to meet the remarkable Noah, a young wheelchair bound boy who collaborated with 200 street artists around the world. Their arts are now displayed in the museum.*

*I've also met some local residents who came in the museum to show the place to their friends visiting them from other cities.*

*There is a sense of pride and ownership of the museum from the community.*

*It's a free entry museum to encourage everyone to visit but there's a bank card tap station for donations.*

*II. Challenges*

*At the early stage, there's a strong resistance from the community as the location was previously a Bus Station. There's that community division of what was more important- A museum or a Bus Station.*

*III. Learning from that trip*

*A. Environmental and Energy saving -*

*It's expensive to run with the cost of energy bills due to materials used (lighting and others ) and lack of Solar Panel.*

*This is something that was significantly highlighted for us to think and plan well.*

*B. Planning and Development*

*The attractive shape with concave and convex walls. The wall dividers that can make the room smaller or bigger according to the needs.*

*The availability of indoor and outdoor space.*

*IV. Cost and support*

*The museum cost £28 million (that's 10 years ago).*

*There are support from different organisations - £100 thousand from Colchester Borough council, £100 thousand from Essex county council and £870 thousand from Arts council as a yearly contribution.*

*There are events, theatre (livestream) and other activities that raised money, but to date the Christmas party hiring raised a significant income.*

Feedback from Cllr Margaret Notley:

*Cllr Notley stated that she was very keen on the touch screen information that were in use at Colchester Castle Museum and she was also impressed with the contactless payment/donation points in the Firstsite Arts Gallery which provided the public with opportunities to make a donation set at different levels at different contactless reader points in the building.*

*Cllr Notley said that she watched the link for the Conceptual Artist Michael Landy and agreed that it does have interesting parallels with Stevenage and the New Towns storytelling/identity.*

*“I think it would be an asset to have a comparable film of Stevenage showing in the new Hub.”*

(The Conceptual Artist, Michael Landy has made a short film about the making of the exhibition that is currently on show at Firstsite on the theme of Essex and all of the stereotypes that are attributed to the County. Although, on face value, this would not appear to be directly linked to the review, it actually says a lot about place and identity, so there are interesting parallels for Stevenage and the New Towns storytelling/identity.)

<https://firstsite.uk/event/michael-landy-the-essex-way/>

Other comments that Member's made during the visit:

- *Any building like this would need to have as close to as passive energy use as is possible, and if possible be net zero in its use. Firstsite is an expensive building to light and heat with a fuel bill of circa £90,000 a year (before current hike in energy prices, so this could easily be double that figure)*
- *The Museum space would have to be agreed in advance with the permanent exhibit areas well thought through so that the Museum doesn't get crowded out by other uses*
- *Having a mixed use/flexible building is very useful so moveable internal walls would be very favourable*
- *There should be places in the building for commercial activity with a profit share with the Council. This could include small start-up linked businesses to provide spaces to sell their services such as on site catering etc. and spaces for new/young artists to display their work and sell it*
- *Hiring out of the building at specific times could be an option for extra income if it is seen as being a desirable space for events etc. so the design/architecture needs to be very attractive as well as environmentally friendly*
- *The Firstsite building was very large, Members thought that the New Towns Heritage Centre would need to be an overall smaller more manageable building*
- *There was concern expressed that a building like Firstsite could be a “money pit” that would have to be able to run at least at break even “wash its face” and not rely on a large subsidy such as Firstsite has.*
- *The Community use of the building and engagement with content and activities was very good but the core activities/financial offer needs to be as secure as possible to make this possible*

<https://www.macegroup.com/projects/greenwich-square> - suggestion from Cllr Margaret Notley re doing a site visit to Mace built Greenwich Square which has a community hub building



#### Feedback from Cllr Claire Parris:

##### Colchester:

- *not really relevant to our model*
- *£28m to build and set up. Overspent and overtime*
- *It could be argued that so far they have not used their space well. For operating they relied on grants. Free entry but did have donation points around the building set up for certain amounts i.e. £5, £1 Not a sustainable building. Energy bills £90k per annum*
- *Had QR codes to give information of the gallery viewing you were entering. The gallery had tablets on the wall to give further information and to provide interactivity. Had community rooms but not clear if they were being utilised efficiently*

#### Members undertook a site visit to Milton Keynes Art Gallery and Musuem – Friday 22 October 2021

#### Feedback from Cllr Claire Parris:

##### Milton Keynes:

- *Gallery in city centre but in my opinion not well advertised around the shopping mall where it was next to*
- *Long gallery and charges for 2 out of 3 of the collections on show annually*
- *Gallery can be seen from one end to the other*
- *Engaged with the community about what they wanted*
- *The museum was older and on the outskirts of Milton Keynes*
- *Very enthusiastic director who will be leaving in 2 years when he's 80!*
- *Solely reliant on volunteers. Only a few members of staff on the payroll*
- *New build £5.2m to tell the story of Milton Keynes. One side the history the other the new town, will be interactive.*

*Both sites showed that you MUST HAVE A CAFE.*

#### Feedback from Cllr John Duncan:

*What we need is a successful Museum that provides a gallery, business incubator, cinema and café that enables us to tell the story of Stevenage.*

#### Further observations from Milton Keynes visit:

##### MK Art Gallery

Design 6a Architects – Art Gallery in City Centre location – £12M remodelled original 1999 building utilising positive features of the building, cutting edge design especially

building façade (steel cladding with perforations in part). Café/restaurant using Terrance Conran/Norman Foster a great bonus – increased footfall and very popular with visitors (very few independents in the town centre) The Café is profitable.



Sky Room Cinema/multi-purpose private hire room with retractable seats. Curtains overlooking great views of the Buckinghamshire countryside. (not something we would have, so not transferable as a feature)



Similar to Colchester have contract with Curzon for the cinema – varied programme including family orientated programme as well as art house. If possible would be a very good feature for Hub/New Town's Heritage Centre as this makes money and pays for other activities.

Arts Programme – varied. Initially feedback was that the 3 main collections were too cutting-edge, following extensive public engagement have a more varied programme. Charge for the main exhibitions (£9.50 for adults - if it's free people don't value it – Free Tuesday for MK residents) and free access to café/shop and other non-exhibition areas of the building.

Hours – Thurs/Fri/Sat – 10am till 8pm Sun – Wed 10am till 5pm

Concept of the building – Arts and Architects immersed themselves in the story and history of MK and worked together on the design. Logo of MK throughout the building in key areas

MK mentioned a PhD Arts Academic – Clare Louise Staunton who has studied Arts and the New Towns who could be a good person to speak to – Members discussed this in the informal meeting and cautioned this approach favouring involving local artists and historian for community co-curation following extensive consultation with the public who may not traditionally use these spaces.

### MK Museum at Wolverton

This site is nowhere near the city centre and as such has been a point of discussion/division for decades.

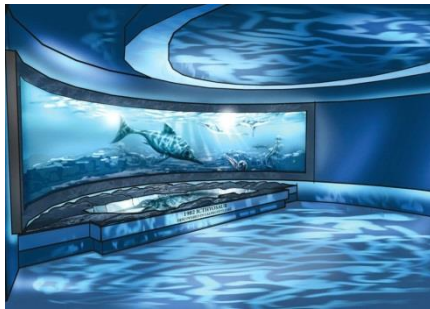
Utilises old buildings from the John Radcliffe Estate and provide a setting for old history of the building. It's a large site with many old buildings housing agricultural history. A unique feature is a telephone museum with working mechanical telephone exchanges. Having a unique selling point/exhibition (outside of the New Towns story) could be worth considering – e.g. Mars Rover Space Exploration

There is a large (older) volunteer base, which are a virtue and a challenge at the same time.

New build element to the Museum - £5.2M building cost – Carbon Neutral building - £2M funding gap. Most of the funding came from the Council and LEP funding. The Heritage

Lottery Fund bid for £2M which was not successful. HLF officers recommended it but overturned by the Board. This surprised MK but it came down to risk appetite based on the very large number of volunteers involved to make it work as a museum. They are confident that this can be overcome with a revised bid to address these issues. This is not something that is likely to affect any funding bids for Stevenage as ratio of volunteers to paid staff would be more equal.

Key feature of the new build part of the Museum will be use of digital images – see below:



The location of the Museum is a problem as it is difficult to reach on public transport due to MK's unique grid system which proves challenging for bus routes. (Not a problem that Stevenage would have with a town centre location). They are trialling a public transport App.

Co-curating – MK Museum make use of this, but as well as getting ideas from the public they are keen to give over areas of the museum for the public to take on for a time to fill the space – this sounded like a very positive move that Stevenage Museum should look to investigate

#### Feedback from Cllr Simon Speller:

*I enjoyed the zoom this afternoon, all the better for being relaxed and informal. It was also very focused on the job in hand.*

*I think John Mead's challenge about Museum without Walls is spot on. We saw examples of really good digital offerings of use to a wide group of people, not least young people at school and college, as well as older people who are digitally literate, so to speak.*

*Whatever we come up with has to be a mix of: aspirational, informative, inclusive, accessible and affordable to Stevenage people. It is precisely the curating, archiving and sharing of our local new town heritage, the memories and stories, that is worthy of national and international interest.*

*I found First Site at Colchester very interesting and excellent in its own way. If we tried to follow that model I think we'd get mired in debt and all that civic embarrassment that would follow. That is City of Culture stuff.*

*We should maybe adopt a hub and spokes model that makes best use of our CNM and Play Services infrastructure, i.e. in our neighbourhoods, as well as the few remaining historic structures like Fairlands Valley Farmhouse, even Rooks Nest (E.M. Forster)*

*That requires a Stevenage specific partnership approach between SBC as programme lead and arch facilitator, and arts and heritage voluntary and community groups. We just do not have the social capital of say WGC.*

*Last point for now: I so agree with John Mead about going directly to the big companies, and major developers, under their corporate social responsibility agendas. They should act their shoe size!!*

**Note from Informal meeting of the Community Select Committee 25 October 2021:**

John Mead former SBC Councillor provided the informal meeting with some insight into developing a digital archive and presence for the Museum:

- The pandemic showed that people want to access info and some experiences online
- Only 10% of a museum's physical collection can be seen at a time
- There are reasons why you might want to not handle documents physically due to their fragile nature
- SBC should be thinking of the concept of "Museums without walls"

John showed Members a number of websites that demonstrated different approaches to digital access to archives and collections:

<https://www.historypin.org/en/> History Pin

<https://maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp/?edition=#> Bristol Know Your Place

<https://coventry.digital/> Coventry Digital

<https://www.welwyngarden-heritage.org/news/item/317-wgc-digital-town-trails> Welwyn digital trails

<https://retailbirmingham.com/birmingham-celebrates-70-years-britain-new-street-photography-exhibition/> Birmingham BID street photography exhibition

Other online digital archives which might be of interest are:

The British Newspaper Archive <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

British Film Institute <https://player.bfi.org.uk/>

Finally if the committee members are interested in how another city used a new heritage centre to open up their archives to the public, they may want to read how Plymouth did it in this article:

<https://www.plymouth.gov.uk/newsroom/features/liftinglidonbox%E2%80%99suniquearchivesky>

Bristol Know Your Place / historyPin.co.uk / Coventry digital – This shows old maps overlaid over new maps and has various tabs and icons that when clicked on reveal local history of the place, who lived there (Blue Plaque), conservation areas, local authority planning history, audio archive of oral history, photos which the public can add their own records to so it democratises the process.

Maintenance of digital archives is vital as overtime links stop working etc. so this is an important aspect to consider



These types of websites can incorporate walks with QR codes.

Coventry digital is linked to the City of Culture programme and has linked with schools in the city with an arts project. The inclusivity of this project is something that would be welcomed.

A dedicated website for the Museum is vital – John expressed disappointment that one of the main recommendations from the scrutiny review carried out 5 years ago was for the museum to have its own website – this was now the right time to make this reality.

The Chair stated that the walks/QR codes idea was excellent and officers should consider getting this started ahead of the outcome of the Towns Deal bid process to show the intent of the Council.

The museum being its own distinct identity, supported by the Council, needed looking at in detail, as it appears that the museum has had funding bids fail due a lack of independence.

How these websites would be funded is a relevant question – John Mead suggested that as far as he was aware they had been funded via national funding organisations like the National Heritage Lottery Fund.

Jo Ward, Stevenage Museum Curator stated that duplication of effort was a danger as many websites overlap their offer. The cost of the software was in the region of £8.5k, the Chair stated that a possible route to this could be in part bids to Members Local Community Budgets (LCBs), and suggested that Jo contact Paula Mills to enquire about the details. Other routes could be approaching large companies based in Stevenage to see if they can support this heritage project.

Jo Ward stated that she was interested in the examples provided by John Mead to pull together digital collections via a web portal where people can access all they need for social history in one place.

People are precious about their digital archive assets, which is right as local communities should be the custodians of this as part of their own social history.

The Chair, Cllr Sarah Mead having heard the feedback from Members and the input from John Mead and Jo Ward stated that the success of future bids will depend on the autonomy of the Heritage Centre. The Chair has suggested that the answer to this could be an Arts Board made up of stakeholders similar to the model of The Town Centre board? In this way SBC would still be a major player but the independent voice of the board would assure investors that independent voices are given equal voice? To this end an Arts and Heritage Board on the lines of the Town Centre Board with a mix of stakeholders could be supported by panels of people who are independent and have specialist arts and heritage expertise from Stevenage, Herts and/or Eastern Region. These could be project or programme specific.

The Chair also endorsed the need for an independent website for the Museum, which would be the first step to satisfying external investors that the Museum is its own entity. In the previous scrutiny for the museum, 2014-15, the recommendation was agreed that the museum should have its own independent website, this really must happen now or could stymie future funding bids where this is a criteria.

The Chair stated that there would need to be careful consideration of the future revenue funding options, some of this could come from commercial activity as well as private hire events and functions but she favoured the core offer to remain free with community

activities supported and the option to seek support from the business community should be a recommendation to be pursued.

The Scrutiny Officer agreed to look at arranging a site visit to Mace built hub at Greenwich.