

Possible emerging recommendations of the Community Select Committee – New Towns Heritage Centre review

Following two formal Committee meetings, an informal meeting and two site visits to other arts centre/museums at Colchester and Milton Keynes the Committee have suggested the following draft recommendations and split them into 5 main key areas of (i) curation and arts programme linked to community engagement and governance; (ii) virtual museums and digital technology linked to the concept of museums without walls; (iii) the building design features linked to the use of technology in the building; (iv) the commercial activity/funding/cost point for entry and (v) developing a hub and spoke approach for arts & historical heritage across the town

From the Members notes of the two site visits on 15 & 22 October and the informal meeting of the Committee on 25 October and the formal meetings of the Committee on 21 September and 3 November 2021 the following suggestions and observations were made by Members, with possible recommendations in yellow highlighted area:

Curation (Arts programme)/engagement with the community/ Governance structure

Curation

- *Curation - 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.*
- 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
- Arts Programme at MK – 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. – (Charging point discussion)
- *"I think it would be an asset to have a comparable film of Stevenage showing in the new Hub."*
- Having a unique selling point/exhibition (outside of the New Towns story) could be worth considering – e.g. Mars Rover Space Exploration

Possible Recommendation:

Stevenage Museum's curation should continue to be led by the expertise of the Museum Curator and engage with local residents through co-curation projects to provide a mix of: aspirational, informative, inclusive, accessible and affordable museum and arts offers to Stevenage people.

As well as a New Towns focus consideration should be given to having a unique selling point/exhibition, outside of the New Towns story, so could be worth considering – e.g. Mars Rover Space Exploration.

Community Engagement

- *Community engagement - 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.*
- *sense of pride and ownership of the museum from the community*
- *Engaged with the community about what they wanted – Important*

Possible Recommendation:

It is important that whatever is offered at the Museum or any public art that is provided within the Hub that it is accessible to the whole of the community, so engagement with all members of the local diverse community should happen to see what would they like to have included.

Management/Governance Structure

- *Management structure - That requires a Stevenage specific partnership approach between SBC as programme lead and arch facilitator, and arts and heritage voluntary and community groups.*
- *Governance structure - 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.*
- *Governance Structure - 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*
- *Solely reliant on volunteers. Only a few members of staff on the payroll – Yes good to have volunteers but not as dependent as MK Museum*

Possible Recommendation:

That serious consideration is given by the Executive to the New Towns Heritage Centre's governance arrangements, setting up an independent Arts Board to provide autonomy for the Heritage Centre made up of a mix of stakeholders, similar to the model with the Town Centre Board, an Arts Board could be supported by a panel of people who are independent of the Council and have a specialist arts and heritage expertise from Stevenage, Herts and/or the Eastern Region.

Museum without walls – Use of technology virtual museum and QR codes around the town

- SBC should be thinking of the concept of “Museums without walls”

Narrative – & Recommendation – Stevenage should aspire to examples - 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 democracies the process.

- A dedicated website for the Museum is vital
- 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.
- Separate funding bid for website software - 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.
- Digital collections via a web portal - 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
- 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

Possible Recommendation:

That the Executive consider, as well as a physical New Towns Heritage Centre as part of the new Civic Hub building in the regenerated Town Centre, pursuing the concept of "Museums without walls". This should include providing funding from the Towns Deal fund or Members Local Community Budgets (LCB) towards a dedicated website for the Museum that is independent of the Council's website. It was quoted that this would cost in the region of £8.5k. This initiative could be pursued in parallel to the main Towns Deal bid/New Towns Heritage Centre, and would incorporate QR codes around the town. The "Museum without walls" concept would include a strong web presence similar to the examples shown at Bristol Know Your Place, which included digital collections via a web portal and was very interactive for users.

Building – design features – use of technology in the building

- *Design features - The wall dividers that can make the room smaller or bigger according to the needs.*
- *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.*
- *Design features - keen on the touch screen information that were in use at Colchester Castle Museum*

Design features –

- *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*
- *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.*

Milton Keynes:

- *Gallery in city centre but in my opinion not well advertised around the shopping mall where it was next to - *Signage and visual clues to where the building is and what's in it will be important*
- Design features - Cinema – Both sites visited at Colchester and Milton Keynes had a cinema which provided a great Arts asset and way of making income. Both have a 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.
- Design features – Environmental Carbon Neutral Building
- Key feature of the new build part of the Museum will be use of digital images – see below:



- **MUST HAVE A CAFÉ**

Possible Recommendation:

That the Executive consider as part of the New Towns Heritage Centre 21st Century design features. The building should have the highest possible environmental credentials and be a carbon neutral building and incorporate the use of technology in the building. The building should incorporate:

- Have a mixed use/flexible building with wall dividers that can make the room smaller or bigger according to the needs
- Provide touch screen information points
- Provide digital images as visitors walk through different spaces
- The Museum space should be agreed in advance with the permanent exhibit areas well thought through so that the Museum doesn't get crowded out by other uses
- A small seated cinema would be very desirable feature as a draw for visitors as well as an income stream. Members are aware that this would be an expensive capital outlay but could be a major asset in the future

- Lessons from the sites visited showed the value of having an on-site Café as a place for people to visit and provide a positive user experience

Commercial activity/Funding/Cost point for entry

- Cost Entry Fee - free entry museum to encourage everyone to visit but there's a bank card tap station for donations. contactless payment/donation points
- Commercial activity - events, theatre (livestream) and other activities that raised money
- Commercial activity - 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- (make this a selling point)
- Should run at least at break-even "wash its face" and not rely on a large subsidy such as Firstsite has

Narrative - 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

- Funding - go directly to the big companies, and major developers, under their corporate social responsibility agendas for grants and sponsorship
- Commercial activity - 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.
- **MUST HAVE A CAFÉ**
- Narrative - 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.

Possible Recommendation:

That the Executive consider the possible Commercial activities associated with the New Towns Heritage Centre. During the site visits Members were taken with the crucial role that various commercial activities can do to support the users of the building: This could include:

- Irrespective of the whether free or not for entry, contactless payment/donation points for bank card use should be provided at various points around the building
- events, theatre (livestream) and other activities that raised money for other non – commercial activities in the Heritage Centre

- 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
- Officers supported by Members should go directly to the big companies, and major developers, under their corporate social responsibility agendas for grants and sponsorship
- There should definitely be a Café that either run in-house to provide income for the building or is run under licence by a tenant to bring in income
- Having a unique selling point/exhibition (outside of the New Towns story) could be worth considering – e.g. Mars Rover Space Exploration

Developing a hub and spoke approach for arts & historical heritage across the town

- *Hub and Spoke - 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)*

Possible Recommendation:

That the Executive consider continuing a hub and spoke model which makes best use of our CNM and Play Services infrastructure, i.e. in our neighbourhoods which would support the main hub core offer at the New Towns Heritage Centre.