

Agenda Item No: 11

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny (Services)

Date of Meeting: 22 November 2012

Report Title: Update on Old Town Hall Museum Review Group

Report By: Virginia Gilbert
Head of Amenities, Resorts and Leisure

Purpose of Report

To summarise the work of the review group and future options for the Museum

Recommendation(s)

- 1. That the Scrutiny Committee acknowledge the work of the review group and give their views on future options**

Reasons for Recommendations

The Old Town Hall Museum review group has overseen changes at the Museum over the past two years which have resulted in growth in attendance and income. As the group concludes its work programme, Scrutiny will wish to assess its achievements and remaining options for future work.

Introduction

1. A group was formed in April 2011 to consider the future of the Old Town Hall Museum in the light of anticipated Council-wide budget reductions in 2013 and beyond. Group membership includes Councillors and representatives of the Museums Committee, Old Hastings Preservation Society and Hastings Old Town Residents Association, supported by officers from Amenities & Leisure.
2. The group has met quarterly since then to consider various short- and long-term options for increasing attendance, increasing income and attracting funding. Alternatives to Council management of this Museum alone or both HBC Museums have also been explored.
3. This report will summarise progress and suggest remaining options.

Background

4. The Hastings Museum was founded in 1890 by the Hastings and St Leonards Museum Association, but in 1905 ownership was transferred to the Borough Council. The constitution of the Museum is embodied in the deed of transfer.
5. The Johns Place Museum is a popular venue for weddings, concerts and other events. We have recently cleared an outdoor space to the rear of the building and have aspirations for a summer garden, reception area and outdoor activity space.
6. The Old Town Hall Museum is housed in a listed building, the former Town Hall which was erected in 1823 and converted into a Museum in 1949. A major refurbishment project took place in 1999 which included re-display of exhibits, focusing on the history of the Old Town from prehistory to present, access improvements and environmental control and monitoring. Since November 2009, the Old Town Tourist Information Centre has operated from the ground floor of the Old Town Hall Museum.
7. Both Museums are accredited through the MLA scheme (now transferred to the Arts Council).

Finance

8. The net cost of operating the Museums service is £420,000 for 2012-13, of which £65,000 is directly attributable to the Old Town Hall Museum. Of that total budget, £245,000 (£37,000 OTHM) is the cost of staffing. Staffing costs have reduced in recent years, mainly due to the loss of the Assistant Curator post and reduced opening hours (Monday closing) at the Johns Place Museum. All other costs are static or have grown through inflation. Income has increased very slowly and is now around £25,000 a year from all sources for the Museums service.
9. The major assets are the Johns Place and Old Town Hall buildings and the collections (over 10,000 items). The terms of our Acquisition and Disposal Policy as well as the rules governing museum accreditation define the circumstances under which disposals are permitted and the acceptable uses of any proceeds.

Actions Completed

10. In June 2011, we revamped the ground floor display space at the Old Town Hall. Display cases were repositioned or removed to open out the space and the windows. The walls were repainted and carpeting and blinds installed. New graphics and labelling were introduced as well as a new donations box.
11. A series of summer events are now in their second year the '5 Days, 5 Treasures, 5 Experts' seminars in Old Town Carnival week. This summer, Sussex Coast College also staged a display of work by students, inspired by objects in the Museum.
12. Over the winter of 2011-12, we completed the ground floor works by moving the printing press to Johns Place, where there is more space for printing sessions, opening up the shop space at the Old Town Hall, introducing new sales lines and generally making the shop more attractive.
13. The upper floor was refurbished and redisplayed in March - May 2012 with the same aim of making the space brighter and more attractive. A window has been exposed, the area repainted and cases repositioned. The exhibitions have changed from a chronological to a themed set of displays, including the Cinque Ports and more local history of Hastings and St. Leonards.
14. Members should note that museum staff have undertaken most of these works to save the expense of outside contractors.

Attendance and Income

15. Visitor numbers have grown over the period. 12,712 visitors were recorded in Summer 2012; 13,137 people visited in Summer 2011. Earlier figures were significantly lower with 10,114 visitors in the same period in 2010 and 5,983 in 2009.
16. Income is increasing slowly. For April to October 2012, income was £2898 which looks promising compared to last year's £3500 income for the year. The major selling items in the shop are day saver tickets, Foyle's War and books generally. The Old Town Hall does not have the space for the events which provide income to Johns Place. We took advantage of a free offer from the Arts Council and used the services of a Museum shop advisor. This exercise produced a few more tips, primarily more merchandise displayed in the windows.
17. We've added a prominent new donations box, courtesy of the Museums Association. The overall income per head has risen nearer to the national average but is still only 20p per visitor.

Options considered

18. In the short term, the Museum's officers will continue to work towards maximising attendance and income and fostering links with other Old Town galleries and museums. The Museums group has considered admission fees, raised at the last Scrutiny committee meeting, but feel strongly that this would damage the slow growth that is developing.

19. Museum officers are considering new initiatives in 2013 to meet the Scrutiny suggestion for attracting local family history enthusiasts. To date such activities have been centred around the local studies room at the Johns Place Museum and this is likely to continue.
20. The group have considered a paper on trust status for the Old Town Hall Museum, the entire Museums service or a larger leisure trust incorporating other heritage assets. However, without a guaranteed Council subsidy or other sources of income, transferring the museum(s) to a trust would not by itself offer any guarantees of sustainability.
21. The current Museum review group will meet once more in January 2013 to review next year's budget proposals. The group will then cease to meet as all actions have been completed. At the final meeting, we will consider what is needed for 2013, possibly based on linkage with other Old Town museums and galleries and the local business community.
22. If the Council's future budget position can no longer support a second Museum in the Old Town, the alternative would involve moving part or all of the Old Town collection to the Johns Place Museum or possibly sharing the collection or premises with one of the other Old Town museums. We are not yet faced with this decision and may avoid it if progress towards sustainability continues. However, it sensible to investigate this option during 2013, possibly through a new group of operators and stakeholders.

Recommendation

23. That the Scrutiny Committee acknowledge the work of the review group and give their views on future options.

Wards Affected

Ashdown, Baird, Braybrooke, Castle, Central St. Leonards, Conquest, Gensing, Hollington, Maze Hill, Old Hastings, Ore, Silverhill, St. Helens, Tressell, West St. Leonards, Wishing Tree

Area(s) Affected

None

Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	No
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	No
Risk Management	No
Environmental Issues	No
Economic/Financial Implications	Yes
Human Rights Act	No

Organisational Consequences
Local People's Views

No
No

Background Information

None

Officer to Contact

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