

## **WAVERLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **COMMUNITY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**17/11/2020**

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**Title:**

**The Museum of Farnham: Options for a new Museum Service**

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**Cllr Martin Portfolio Holder for Health, Wellbeing and Culture**

**Cllr Merryweather Portfolio Holder for Finance, Assets and Commercial**

**Head of Service: Kelvin Mills, Head of Commercial Services**

**Key decision:        Yes**

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#### **1.     Purpose and summary**

The Museum of Farnham is the last remaining museum in the Borough owned and operated by Waverley Borough Council at a cost of £77,000 per annum. The service is managed by Farnham Maltings on the Council's behalf under a SLA. The museum collection has been located in Willmer House, a Grade 1 Listed building owned by WBC, for many years and to some extent the two have become synonymous.

On 29 June the Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report which summarised concerns about the deteriorating condition of Willmer House. The report gave an explanation of the building's defects; highlighting the methodology, costs and timeframe involved should the Council be in a position to commit to necessary conservation works starting at the beginning of 2021.

At the Community O and S meeting, Members expressed their support for repairing Willmer House recognising the building's important historical status. They were of the view that it should remain protected in Waverley's custody even if it is no longer appropriate as a home for the museum. It was accepted that alternative usages for Willmer House should now be explored alongside an investigation of different service models and possible locations for the museum service and collection.

The aim of this report is to obtain an agreement "in principle" to explore the potential for developing a museum service for Farnham as a freestanding entity that is independent of Willmer House.

## **2. Recommendation**

Officers ask the Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee to debate the following recommendations so that the committee's views on the future of the Museum of Farnham are taken into account by the Council's Executive Committee.

The Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. Agree "in principle" to look at the potential of separating the Museum of Farnham (service and collection) from Willmer House.
2. Agree to Officers being given a mandate to explore, consult and test the viability of different options for the museum service and collection going forward.
3. Give consideration to a timescale and the provision of a budget to carry out an options review that includes an understanding of the logistics associated with the museum collection.
4. Shall have the opportunity to be consulted on potential options for the museum service and collection and to make recommendations to the Council's Executive.

## **3. Reason for the recommendation**

In recent years the Museum of Farnham has seen a gradual decline in visitor numbers indicating that the service is not performing at its optimum in its present format and within Willmer House. The building's uncertain future has been a major factor as it has prevented the service from being able to develop a long term vision and plan for the museum. The ongoing situation with the building has also hampered efforts to pursue external funding, despite the interest shown by grant makers, simply because the owner (WBC) is unable to commit to the building being used as a museum for a considerable period of time into the future, ideally a commitment of at least 10 years.

Other factors affecting the museum's performance include a wholesale change in the staff team combined with the fact that they spend a disproportionate amount of time maintaining a Grade 1 listed building and garden. Although beautiful, Willmer House is not particularly well suited to the modern requirements of a public building as the upper floors cannot be accessed by people in wheelchairs or with mobility issues. The building is located in the quieter end of town and its poor external signage is not helped by the presence of the safety scaffold. The lack of vehicle access and off street parking has curtailed the potential of the Garden Gallery, as it creates ongoing issues with the residents of Bishops Mead. Lastly, the age and fabric of the building creates environmental conditions such as humidity and damp that are harmful to historic archives and artefacts in the collection.

## **4. Background**

In the previous report Members were given a comprehensive update of the options and actions that have been progressed by the Museum working Group in their bid to find a

solution including; holding a consultation event, a review of grant making bodies, the pros and cons of placing the building on the Heritage at Risk Register, the creation of a trust and alternative locations and models for service delivery.

Prior to coronavirus, the museum working group was making good progress in researching and approaching grant making bodies such as the National Heritage Lottery, Arts Council England and Historic England. But the scale of the financial challenge inflicted by the pandemic has drastically altered the funding environment. In August the Council was compelled to agree an emergency budget, while in the cultural sector funding bodies are ploughing their resources into the survival of organisations.

Identifying the level of funding needed to rectify the building and radically rethink the museum offer has therefore proven difficult in the short term but it is important to recognise that this situation will not last forever and that external funding is still a plausible option for the future.

## **Governance Journey**

The Portfolio Holders for Health, Wellbeing and Culture and Finance, Assets and Commercial Services have been fully engaged in the process of trying to identify a solution to the problem. The matter has been previously discussed by the Community Overview and Scrutiny Committee and this report reflects the comments and political steer that Members have provided in these discussions.

Willmer House has been referred to the Property Investment and Advisory Board who have commissioned Montagu Evans to carry out an independent options appraisal for the building going forward. The findings will be reported to Members once the appraisal process is complete.

## **5. Relationship to the Corporate Strategy and Service Plan**

5.1 This report relates to the priority of delivering high quality public services for all including sports, leisure, arts, culture and open spaces.

## **6. Implications of decision**

### **6.1 Resource (Finance, procurement, staffing, IT)**

The report identifies that Wilmer House is not a viable option for the long term preservation of the museum artefacts or for the modern and optimal display of the collection.

Wilmer House also has its specific problems being a grade one listed building and in need of significant repair. The current façade renovation is quoted at a minimum cost of £550,000. Funding the renovation and ongoing maintenance is financially challenging, even more so after the impact of Covid on the council's reserves and priorities for the available funding.

An options appraisal has been commissioned to get a full understanding of the realistic

future for Wilmer House, currently it is being treated as an operational asset as the home to the museum collection. Going forward the house will need to be able to pay for itself to stay within Waverley's ownership and justify the financial resources required for repairs. The options appraisal will be available by the end of November at which point a full analysis of the funding options will be provided alongside the detail of the options appraisal.

Separating the Museum service and collection from Willmer House will involve significant costs, which we would seek to recover through the resolution of the future for Wilmer House. The Museum holds approximately 20,000 individual objects in its collections. Moving the collection will therefore be a considerable undertaking that will require professional museum technicians to pack, transport and store the collection. Additional storage with appropriate environmental conditions is required to store the fragile onsite collections. Deaccessioning the collection so that it can be disposed ethically is a time consuming process that will require additional staff or volunteer resource. Rental or hosting costs are likely to be incurred if the museum service and/or collection is rehoused elsewhere.

Clearly, any future plans for the building will require some significant work to identify a positive way forward for the museum service and collection. The Council is therefore strongly encouraged to make provision for a modest budget in order to be able to procure external advice on the range of service models that exist, the logistical challenges associated with the collection and the development of a plausible option going forward.

## **6.2 Risk management**

**Political** – the building falls into further disrepair affecting visitor numbers. Lack of decision making leading to reputational damage. Potentially damaging to the Craft Town brand.

**Financial** – the cost of the repairs, the ongoing capital burden of maintaining a grade I listed building, the value of the building and the constraints of grade I listing impacting on investment in the museum offering.

**Sector**- uncertainty over the building makes long term planning for the museum difficult. Accreditation status is reduced from Full to Provisional. The cessation of the management contract with Farnham Maltings.

**HR** – since the museum staff are employed by Farnham Maltings there are no HR implications for the Council to consider.

## **6.3 Legal**

There is no restrictive covenant within the property deeds which would impede the sale or relocation of the museum collection to an alternative location. This advice does not cover any challenges that may arise from the Grade I listing or indeed any other statutory obligation placed upon the Council concerning the sale of heritage assets. Subsequently, the Council's Historic Buildings Officer has advised that there are no restrictions regarding a change of use though as a rule of thumb the best use is considered to be what the house was originally intended for i.e. single house occupancy with minimal change to the structure of the building.

## **6.4 Equality, diversity and inclusion**

There are no direct equality, diversity or inclusion implications in this report. Equality

impact assessments are carried out when necessary across the council to ensure service delivery meets the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010.

## **6.5 Climate emergency declaration**

This report seeks to review options for a different museum service and therefore there are no climate implications as a result of this work. Subsequent proposals may well have a climate impact and they will be considered as part of any future recommendation.

## **7. Consultation and engagement**

7.1 See earlier comments from the Community Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

## **8. Other options considered**

- Not applicable.

## **9. Governance journey**

9.1 The Community Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee will receive a report at their meeting on 17 November 2020.

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## **Background Papers**

**There are / are no** background papers, as defined by Section 100D(5) of the Local Government Act 1972).

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## **CONTACT OFFICER:**

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Agreed and signed off by:

Legal Services: date

Head of Finance: date

Strategic Director: date

Portfolio Holder: date