



Norwich Area Museums Committee

14:00 to 16:00

8 September 2020

Present: City Councillors: **County Councillors:**
 Huntley (chair) Brociek-Coulton (vice chair)
 Grahame Jones
 Maxwell Ward
 McCartney-Gray
 Price
 Schmierer

Co-opted non-voting members:

Felicity Devonshire (Friends of Norwich Museums), Brenda Ferris (Norfolk Contemporary Art Society), Amanda Geitner (East Anglia Arts Fund) and Councillor King (Broadland District Council)

Apologies: City Councillor Wright, County Councillors Clipsham, Nobbs and Watkins (other council business); and Councillor Easter (South Norfolk Council)

(The chair welcomed Councillor David King to his first meeting of the committee. Councillor King would be representing Broadland District Council as a non-voting member of the committee.)

1. Public questions/petitions

There were no public questions or petitions.

2. Declarations of interest

None.

3. Minutes

RESOLVED to agree the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 3 March 2020.

4. Norwich Museums Briefing – March to August 2020

The assistant head of museums by way of introduction explained that the purpose of the report was to update members on the impact of Covid-19 on the museums service and the three Norwich museums in particular, and to brief members on the mitigation or actions that have been put in place. There was also an update on the Norwich Castle project which, not unsurprisingly, had also been impacted by the

pandemic. The report was presented in sections by the assistant head of museums, the operations manager and the learning team manager.

The assistant head of museums presented the first section of the report. Norfolk Museums Services (NMS) closed all its museums in line with government guidance on 19 March 2020. The majority of staff were working from home, with some staff involved in the wider county council response to the Covid-19 emergency. During the closure staff have developed a broad range of digital resources to increase access to collections, particularly for children and families. Other resources had also been developed as it was appreciated that there were some people, particularly some young people, without easy access to digital content. Members could request to be added to the distribution list "Museums Mardle" an electronic newsletter issued originally aimed to staff to keep them informed but was of interest to a wider audience.

The assistant head of museums asked that it be put on record his enormous gratitude to those staff who had been so actively involved in all of the hard work to prepare the sites for reopening, which as members could appreciate was a complex task and it was pleasing to see visitors at these sites. The report set out the measures undertaken by the NMS to reopen the museums in accordance with agreed procedures with the county council's health and safety and wellbeing team and following sector specific guidance (National Museums Directors Council). NMS had prioritised the reopening of the three larger sites: Time and Tide, Gressenhall, and Norwich Castle. Strangers' Hall and the Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell would be reopening at a later date. Norwich Castle had been available to pass holders and Friends who pre-booked visits from 24 August 2020, which was later than the other two sites because of the construction works. The castle was not yet open to general public but when it was safe to do so would be extended to them as well.

The operations manager presented the second section of the report and explained the arrangements in place for the reopening of Norwich Castle to the public. The Wider Impact Group had always planned for a reduced offer to visitors to Norwich Castle during the construction phase of the Norwich Castle project. He referred members to the plans included in the report and explained that it was necessary to have separate visitor entrances and exits to comply with government and council guidance for the opening of public buildings. There were currently hoardings in place whilst pipes for the toilet facilities in the Rotunda were installed and this prevented access to the first floor. The completion of this work was expected in October and would enable parts of the first floor to be reopened to visitors, including the Timothy Gurney Gallery and a section of the Regimental Collections, which would be of interest to paying visitors. Due to the construction works and Covid-19, it was necessary to control the number of visitors at Norwich Castle at any one time through booked tickets and the introduction of a mini-one way system on the first floor. This had further reduced the offer from the planned 420 visitors to 126 visitors in Norwich Castle at any one time. Members were referred to the plan showing the entrances for wedding parties and noted that weddings had recommenced from 25 July in the Colman Gallery, with an average of two ceremonies per day. The offer was much reduced with wedding parties being restricted to the couple and 10 guests, facilitated by registrars. It was working well.

The assistant head of museums provided details of the increase in digital activity to deliver access to the museums and collections.¹ NMS staff had always sought to engage with members of the public through social media platforms. During the lockdown NMS had published 47 different videos on its YouTube channel including the *Lockdown Living Room Escape Room* challenge. It had also built on existing audiences increasing the number of views to a wider audience with 134,000 views recorded during this period across YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Norwich Castle had seen an increase of 36 percent views on Instagram. There were 3,000 new followers for the three Norwich museums on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The Museum of Norwich had received 142,000 tweets on Twitter for *Picture in the Pandemic* compared with 35,000 tweets prior to lockdown. It was a credit to the Learning team who had tailored social media to the public appetite such as a nostalgic 20th century photo exhibition including one of key workers (nurses, shop workers and carers). The Norwich Castle Blog had been launched with 22 posts to date with over 2,500 views.

During discussion, a member suggested that there was an opportunity to display the museums' collections to a wider audience by using vacant shop windows, taking into consideration security and other factors. The assistant head of museums welcomed this idea commenting that the model of the castle, that had been a popular feature in the Keep, was now on display in the Castle Quarter to remind shoppers of the proximity of the castle. The vice chair pointed out the success of art projects where artwork was displayed in shop fronts. Members also noted the collaboration with Archant over the summer.

In reply to a member's question, the assistant head of museums said that the loss of income generated through admission charges would have a significant impact on NMS and the Keep Project. NMS had made an application to the ACE Cultural Recovery Fund. The county council was closely monitoring the financial impact of Covid-19 on this, as with all its services, and reported to members as appropriate. Members were advised that the financial detail of the service was not usually reported to this committee but, subject to protocol, members could be provided with information on the overall position.²

During discussion members commented on the arrangements for pre-booking tickets. The assistant head of museums service said that in practice where people who had not booked for Gressenhall or Time and Tide had been accommodated where timeslots were available. The operations manager and the assistant head of museums explained the reasons for initially reserving admittance at Norwich Castle to passholders because the offer was currently constrained by the current phase of Norwich Castle project and Covid-19 requirements. The general public would be admitted when there was a good quality visitor experience to offer and value for money could be assured. The price structure for admission to Norwich Castle, when members of the public were admitted, would reflect the reduced offer and was commensurate to the price structure and offer at Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell (ie approx. 40 per cent less than the regular admission charges for Norwich Castle).

¹ [Headline social media statistics](#)

² It was subsequently confirmed that financial reports are made to the Norfolk Joint Museums Committee. Members could access these financial reports via the relevant committee pages on the Norfolk County Council's website .

The learning manager presented the presented third section of the report which highlighted the activities of the Norwich Museums Learning Team and continue to develop its programmes for priority and targeted audiences through new modes of engagement. Members were advised that the team had been proactive in contacting all schools which had booked sessions that had to be cancelled by sending them a pack of resources to help teachers deliver the curriculum. As part of the recovery programme, the appetite for taking children out of a school setting had changed and therefore the team was developing its virtual schools offer and making videos, the first of which would be available at the end of the month. The team was calling on advice from the sector and was working in collaboration with Norfolk schools. The feasibility of holding visits for school bubbles after half-term was being considered. The summer programme for families with children aged 6 to 11 years' old could not be held on site whilst museums were closed and been held online and digitally, including in collaboration with Children's Services. As part of the programme, Kick the Dust had delivered 400 art packs to children to engage in arts and craft activities. Online workshops meant that families that could not usually attend activities at Norwich Castle could participate. Discussions were being held with the YMCA about re-engaging its residents through the equivalent of a bubble class with Kick the Dust. Collaboration between the Keep project learning and engagement officer and the Norwich Kick the Dust project worker meant that there was a programme of activities for this year's Looked After Children Summer School, including a pack of activities with awareness that digital poverty was a barrier for participation.

The assistant head of museums commented that the Kick the Dust project provided a long term legacy for young people and that it was vitally important to continue the partnership at this time. There had been 700 interventions for a total of 250 young people during the lockdown. Other statistics were contained in the report.

In reply to a member's question, the assistant head of museums confirmed that, as discussed at the last meeting, an artist had been commissioned to provide attractive graphics on the hoardings leading to Norwich Castle. Not all of the hoardings had been erected yet and it did not seem appropriate to overtly advertise whilst the museum was only partially open but would be completed to coincide with the opening to the general public.

The assistant head of museums then provided an update to members on the progress of the Norwich Castle "Palace Reborn" project. The construction contract had been awarded to Morgan Sindall Construction who had taken possession of the site (construction zone) on 10 August 2020. The delivery plan had been revised to assimilate the impact of Covid-19 and ensure that working practices were Covid-secure. The works in the Rotunda had been brought forward because of the small number of visitors in September. This meant that when Norwich Castle was open to the public, the whole of the Rotunda and the new toilet facilities would be available for visitors. Piling for the large tower crane was currently being undertaken. This would serve as a large advertising hoarding for the project. Residents could keep up to date on the progress of the project on the website³. The Norwich Castle Tapestry volunteers had now completed over 14 thousand hours of work on the tapestry throughout the lockdown period.

³ <https://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/norwich-castle/castle-keep-transformation>

In reply to a question, the assistant head of museums explained that it was proposed to provide a small pop-up retail area at the Rotunda desk when the hoardings were removed. There was also a pop-up catering facility ready to provide hot drinks, cakes and sandwiches. The café at Gressenhall was currently providing a takeaway service. The problem in the Rotunda was that people would be sitting in a limited space with other visitors passing through and it was therefore considered difficult to manage within Covid-secure guidelines.

Discussion ensued on staffing. In response to a question, the assistant head of museums said that furloughed catering and retail staff were returning to work as museums reopened. They were also being deployed to assist with additional cleaning services and provide support and guidance to visitors. Staff were being supported as they returned to the workplace or whilst working at home. In reply to a member's question, the assistant head of museums said that the NMS had a good record of supporting apprenticeships and trainees and an apprentice scheme could be considered. Ten museum trainees had been appointed in April. They had received online support but most of the trainees had not yet been on site and therefore their appointments would be extended by a further 6 months.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) note the [report](#);
- (2) record the committee's gratitude to the NMS staff for their delivery of the service during the lockdown and closure of the museums as a result of Covid-19, and the hard work undertaken to reopen the museums.
- (3) remind members that they can receive "Museums Mardle" on request.
- (4) ask the assistant head of museums to consider:
 - (a) sharing financial information on the NMS with members (see footnote 2 above);
 - (b) potential to use shop fronts to display items from the museum's collections;
 - (c) provide details of the [statistics on social media](#).

5. Friends of the Norwich Museums

Felicity Devonshire presented the report which provided members with a summary of the recent activities of the Friends of the Norwich Museums. (A copy of the [report](#) is available on the Norwich City Council website with the papers for the meeting.)

In the report the committee was advised that the Friends had elected a new Chairman, Charles Bingham Newland, an art expert, who began his tenure in May. The Friends had continued to plan for their centenary in 2021. Lord Cholmondely, Patron of the Friends of the Norwich Museums, would be hosting a buffet luncheon at Houghton Hall for the Friends. Also in its centenary year, the Friends were sponsoring an exhibition of the work of John Crome at Norwich Castle, to mark the

bicentenary of his birth. The exhibition would run from April to September and would be of international, national and local interest. The Friends would also be promoting its work during the centenary year with a view to attracting new members and would have a presence at the Forum during the Heritage Opening Days' week.

RESOLVED to thank Felicity Devonshire for the report and note it.

CHAIR