
Meeting of the Executive

11 March, 2008

Report of the Assistant Director (Lifelong Learning and Culture)

Future of the City Archives Service

Summary

1. This report proposes next steps in determining a way forward for the future of the City Archive.

Background

2. In January 2005 the Executive received a report of the Leisure and Heritage Scrutiny Board about the future of York City Archives. This scrutiny review was to address:
 - How the City Archive can achieve its full potential to deliver effective services to the widest possible community
 - How it can engage those currently least likely to benefit from our archival heritage: the non-specialist, community groups, and students in school
 - The key factors to be taken account of in creating satisfactory accommodation for the historic material
3. In its final report the board set out a vision for a future archives service that will be a source of learning, interest, inspiration, and fun for all sections of the community. The vision is set out in Annex A.
4. The primary recommendations of the report were that the Council should pursue:
 - i) An Archive Service for the City of York with:
 - a) robust arrangements for re-housing the city's collections underpinned by a clear specification for their care
 - b) a partnership to deliver a service capable of promoting access to the collections and delivering the vision set out below
 - ii) A process for securing such a partnership arrangement which will:
 - a) comply with all relevant procurement regulations
 - b) ensure that there is a specialist archivist provided to care for the city's collections
 - c) create a board (of users, specialists and Council reps.) to oversee the functioning of the partnership and of the city's collections and management policies

5. In accordance with these recommendations a procurement process was undertaken following an open procedure and complying with European public procurement directives in respect of service contracts. Although 3 bids were received the annual cost of the best tender was far in excess of the current budget provision (£120,130). As such it was not affordable and the tender could not therefore be awarded.
6. Options available as a result were:
 - For officers to re-examine the specification of the service and to determine whether in the light of the tender prices received it may be possible to specify a level of service likely to be procured at a more affordable cost. The service would then need to be retendered
 - To develop proposals for a revised in-house service
7. Officers have re-examined the specification in the light of the tenders submitted through the procurement process. It is clear that the affordability gap is such that any reduction in the specification at a level that could close that gap would not procure a service that would meet the Council's minimum requirements and could certainly not deliver the outcomes set out in the agreed vision. It is therefore necessary to consider options for a revised in-house service.

Consultation

8. Officers have continued to keep staff and stakeholder groups informed. Further consultation will be integral to the development of options and proposals. Key consultees will be users, staff, other partner organisations, user groups within the Heritage sector, The National Archives, etc.

The Way Forward

9. Given the depth of the collections and their international importance the City Archive Service should aspire to excellence and to being one of the very best in the country. It needs to be responsive to the needs of customers (and citizens), efficient and of a high quality. It must relate to city-wide strategies and be capable of delivering the agreed vision.
10. From the Archives scrutiny report and from the views of stakeholders expressed as part of that exercise it is clear that it is vital that the city archive remains and is developed as a focus for civic pride and identity. This has clear implications for the need to retain its distinct identity and ethos.
11. At the same time step-change is needed within the organisational structure: staff, systems, skills, styles, partnerships, and community involvement. Key issues to be addressed include the pressing need to:
 - Improve the housing of the collection
 - Bring about step change in the number of people using the collections
 - Create virtual access to the collections preferably seamless with the other heritage institutions in the city
 - Build a new staff team following the retirement of the 2 senior members of the archives team

- Create a partnership of flagship status capable of contributing to the development of national practice and professional training, and attracting funding
 - Create the resources to undertake outreach and education work
12. To make these changes and to move towards a new type of organisation capable of delivering the vision set out in Annex A a governance structure will be needed that:
- Increases community and stakeholder involvement
 - Facilitates partnership working with the other institutions in the city
 - Provides a clear focus on the historic collections interfacing effectively with the issues of handling the Council's current records after the move to Hungate
 - Generates significant increased income streams over above the current baseline annual funding
 - Has scope to raise funds to assist with the development of access to and interpretation of the collections
 - Deploys a change team to lead, plan and develop the new organisation

The Options

13. There is a range of organisational options for the delivery of the Archives Service, which can be characterised as:
- stay as it is
 - undertake organisational development

Analysis

14. Previous investigations into the future of the City Archive have demonstrated that staying as it is is not a realistic option for a number of key reasons:
- There are long-term concerns about the ability of the current facilities to house the collections adequately; the Public Record Office (now the National Archives) issued a report in 2000 which made it clear that the accommodation for the City Archive was inadequate and must be addressed. Our rights to accept deposits of tithe and manorial documents have been withdrawn due to concerns about the ability to care for them satisfactorily in the current building
 - The archive facilities do not encourage access: space is limited, there are low staffing levels and a lack of virtual access.
 - The potential for virtual access is unrealised, at a time when there is unprecedented demand for on-line access particularly to genealogical information
 - The service is not well used: there is a relatively small core of users
 - The service has no coherent or sustainable links to other city initiatives promoting heritage, festivals, tourism, or civic identity

15. To address the issues set out in paragraphs 11 and 12 above a feasibility study is proposed to investigate options for governance structures. The primary focus will be on the potential to establish a trust to take responsibility for the city archive and to set out a project plan to implement any new arrangements recommended.

The Feasibility Study

16. This study would be run during 2008/9. The first 6 months would be spent undertaking the feasibility investigation and developing options. There would then be a 3 month period for consultation and initial reporting. A 3 month lead in period would then be available prior to implementation of any new governance arrangements from 1 April 2009. (Any development for the Archive itself would clearly require longer).
17. Additional resources are required to lead this project. The National Railway Museum (NRM) has kindly agreed to make available their Senior Curator - Knowledge and Access, Richard Taylor, to lead the project. Richard who is a senior and highly experienced archivist will work on the project for an average of 3 days per week over 9 months from April.

Implications

Financial:

18. The cost of buying in project leadership from the NRM for 9 months will be approximately £30k. No budget currently exists to fund this. Options are:
 - a) To fund the full amount from the Council's reserves. This will enable the feasibility study to be undertaken as an additional piece of work. The Archives Service will then be able to function as normal during this period. (From 1 April normal opening will be 4 days per week, reduced from 5 days per week as a result of a saving agreed in the budget process for 2008/09).
 - b) To partly offset the £30k cost by a reduction in the regular staffing contingent during this period. The remaining half-time City Archivist (SO1) post is vacant and could be kept so, saving £12k. The balance of £18k would need to be funded from the Council's reserves. The Archive would still be open to the public over the 4 days providing a "care and maintenance" service with: some reduction in the depth of support that could be offered to enquiries, documents retrieved at set times rather than on demand, and the suspension of Thursday late opening.
19. The Council has reserves that can be used to fund non-recurring expenditure. It is important that the Council maintain a minimum level of revenue reserves to deal with any unforeseen events. The value of the minimum level of these reserves is determined by a risk assessment undertaken by the Director of Resources and included in the annual Revenue Budget report. For 2008/09 the minimum recommended level is £5.222m. It is estimated that there will be approximately £1.376m of other revenue reserves available, thus the level of the general fund balance should not fall below £3.846m. The current forecast level of the general fund balance at the end of 2008/09 is £4.575m, although there are also potential needs for net use in future years amounting to £1.316m. The

minimum balance available, if this application is approved in full (option a) will be £4.545m.

20. It is not expected that the project will identify savings in the operation of the city archives given the low level of current spending. The objective will, however, be to greatly increase user numbers and other outputs for the same level of expenditure and to identify a governance structure that will unlock additional funding for the service.

HR:

21. The post of City Archivist will be kept vacant during the 9 months of the study. The post will be reviewed and recruited to at the end of the study in the light of the study's recommendations. A secondment from the Library Service will be made at a level dependent on the option selected from paragraph 18 above to ensure that the archives service continues to operate effectively during this period.
22. There are no equalities, crime and disorder, property or information technology implications immediately arising from this report.

Corporate Priorities

23. The City Archive supports a number of Council objectives including:
 - Promote greater use of libraries and archives to ensure that they are an essential source of information and learning (CA7: Vibrant and eventful city)
 - Increase the number of people learning from the knowledge that is stored in our museums and galleries (CA7: Vibrant and eventful city)
 - Strive for excellence and creativity in educational achievement (CA2: Improve Opportunities for Learning)
 - Improve the range of opportunities for formal and informal adult and lifelong learning, and support residents to develop skills for life (CA2: Improve Opportunities for Learning)

Risk Management

24. There is a risk of a negative inspection report from The National Archives if a solution is not found for the city archive within a reasonable period of time. This could result in withdrawal of public record office status which would mean that public records would have to be withdrawn.

Recommendations

25. The Executive is asked to agree to the proposed feasibility study and to indicate which of the funding options set out in paragraph 18 it wishes to select.

Reason: To progress development of options for the future of the city archives.

Annexes

A. Vision for the archives service

Contact Details

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Wards Affected:

All ✓

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

Scrutiny of the City of York Archives Service: Report to the Executive, 17 Jan. 2006
Tender documents. File held by C.D. Croft