

18 February 2022

Stoke-on-Trent City Council,
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The Heritage Network for Stoke-on-Trent

Contact our Secretary via
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or through Potteries Heritage Society
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Heritage Network for Stoke-on-Trent

Following the release of new information on 15 Feb, The Heritage Network is compelled to offer another public response to the changes proposed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council to the Museums Service as outlined in '*Addendum To Agenda Item 7: Medium Term Financial Strategy and Council Tax Setting 2022/23*' tabled at the Cabinet meeting held on 15 Feb. It also makes detailed reference to further comments made by Cllr Abi Brown, Leader of Stoke-on-Trent Council in '*Statement - Stoke-on-Trent Museums*' published on 15 Feb. Our additional comments should be read in conjunction with our previous detailed consultation submission in response to the original proposals: bit.ly/Budget_Response

Although we must acknowledge and offer a limited welcome to the changes proposed, in reality, these revisions are minimal. The lack of any significant change of direction or related revised budgets clearly highlights that the Council and its Leader have not 'listened carefully' to the feedback received and intend to carry on regardless. The main thrust of the original proposals and major budget cuts remain the same. There are arguably even more unanswered questions and serious concerns.

The Leader and Council's response is insufficient and some of the comments are disingenuous at best and patronising at worst. The revised proposals do not directly address the many specific concerns raised or the multiple requests for further information by 468 respondents to the Budget Consultation. The additional statement by the Leader is defiant and tone deaf to the widespread and vociferous public criticism. It is also highly insensitive to current members of staff who have been served with redundancy notices and must be very anxious about the current chaotic situation; not to mention extremely angry about some of the shocking public comments in relation to professional expertise and performance.

With respect, it is not credible to simply claim that these proposals demonstrate 'an administration who care deeply for the conservation of this city's heritage'. You must offer clear evidence of how these proposals were formed; who was consulted and why, which experts were engaged and what development process led to these particular priority actions and related budget (cuts). These proposals and additional statement do not inspire confidence in the Council's future stewardship of our museums; in fact, they have added to concerns. It's clear to all that these damaging proposals and related budget cuts are driven by the need for 'savings' and nothing to do with the apparent 'required modernisation of the museums service'. We acknowledge that the local authority is under severe financial pressure from central government, but the proposals and budget cuts represent potentially severe and detrimental consequences to our city's heritage crown jewels.

Our original Budget Consultation concerns remain the same; namely, that these proposals and related budget cuts will have an **immediate, significant and long-lasting** adverse impact on both the Museums Service provision and wider cultural heritage offer of Stoke-on-Trent.

The proposed budget cuts remain severe and brutal:

- **The revised proposals equate to an annual cut in 2022/23 of £479k** (reduced from £560k identified in the original proposal), and
- **5 year budget cuts (year-on-year) that total £2,577,000** (reduced from £2,830,000 in the original proposals).
- The annual 'Existing Budget' for the Museums Service has previously been stated as £1,704,000 (net expenditure); **the proposed revised figure of £479k 'saving' represents a 28% budget cut in 2022/23** (reduced from 33% in the original proposal, i.e. a minimal overall change of 5% in relation to the original budget cut proposed for 2022/23).

Detailed response to scrutiny, consultation and amended proposals:

Strategy and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee considered re: CMS02-2223 – Museum Service Reconfiguration including operating model and grant funding options on 12 Jan. The Committee sought:

- Details of footfall and questioned whether action could be taken to increase footfall, rather than reducing opening times.
- With regards to Ford Green Hall, the Committee questioned how much it would cost to operate the venue, should the current operators determine that it is not viable to run.
- Concern was also expressed in relation to retaining knowledge within the city, if posts are deleted.
- Questions were also raised in relation to the projected £125k income from filming.

Our response:

To our knowledge, these specific questions were neither addressed, discussed nor answered either prior to, or during, the Cabinet meeting on 15 Feb. No specific answers or specific additional information has been provided or was offered in Cabinet papers or the Addendum prior to the Cabinet meeting on 15 Feb. Please can you confirm whether you responded to the Scrutiny Committee and provided specific answers to these questions and/or additional information as requested? Can this response be made public? If not, why not?

Budget Consultation Feedback

Cabinet papers (15 Feb) reported that 'a considerable number of responses in respect of the museums service proposals have been received'. There were 468 formal submissions by stakeholders and interested parties that included local, national and international contributions. There was also a wider independent 'Change.Org' petition which gathered more than 23,000 signatures to date as well as wide spread criticism across social media and traditional news platforms as well as sector specific web channels.

The 'formal' concerns and comments submitted were summarised by the Council as follows:

- Concern re impact on promoting the cultural history, and pottery / industrial heritage of the city
- Request that more details are provided of what the new operational model will look like, and current visitor numbers
- Concern about what the impact of losing staff with expert knowledge will have on the museum's collections
- Concern that option to create a network of visitor experiences with multi-access entry, has not been considered
- Concern about impact on education, helping young people in the city understand the history of the city
- Concern about the impact on the number of visitors to the city
- Concerns that all areas of increasing revenue have not been explored
- Concern about the level of additional income that will be generated from filming and other events
- Concern that people will no longer wish to leave legacies to the museum or donate / loan items to the ceramic collection
- Concern that the proposal will lead to reduced access to the museum collections
- Concern that staffing reduction could also result in a reduction in volunteers
- Concern about loss of confidence of stakeholders and funders

Our response:

To our knowledge and understanding, these specific concerns and requests for further information have neither been addressed, discussed nor answered either prior to, or during, the Cabinet meeting on 15 Feb. No specific answers or specific additional information has been provided or was offered in Cabinet papers or the Addendum prior to the Cabinet meeting on 15 Feb. Please can you confirm whether you responded to these specific Budget Consultation concerns? If you did, please can you share your response. If you did not provide a specific response to each of the specific concerns outlined; please can you explain that decision?

'Addendum To Agenda Item 7' and accompanying 'Statement - Stoke-on-Trent Museums' published on 15 Feb

Our response to specific changes identified and statement comments by Cllr Abi Brown:

- The changes to the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery (PMAG) opening times are to be welcomed but are limited and lack detail. The building will remain closed to the public on Tuesdays.
- The proposed 'winter closure' of Gladstone Pottery Museum (GPM) remains a major concern. The Leader and Council would appear intransigent and the changes are minimal and lack detail.
- The revised proposals still equate to at least four months of the year when GPM's doors will essentially be closed to local taxpayers, school children and tourists.

- While the claim that ‘footfall is falling’ has been emphasised in both proposal and the statement; no evidence has been offered as to how these proposals will help to improve this situation. Surely, closing the site and integrated cafe through the winter months will have the absolute opposite impact? Is there a detailed analysis and evidence of the footfall decline referenced for each museum? Presumably, any analysis takes into consideration the pandemic, enforced and planned filming closures and overall impact?
- Has any work been undertaken in relation to (predicted) future footfall trends? Especially analysis that considers, and factors in, the hugely significant and positive impact of *The Great Pottery Throw Down* and *The Colour Room*? Can this be published or shared in public? If not, why not?
- There is no mention whatsoever of the significant new ‘Income Target (filming etc)’ estimated at £125k identified in the original proposals and presumably the rationale behind the proposed five month closure of GPM. This was a headline issue and concern shared by many Budget Consultation respondents; yet absolutely no further information or details have been offered.
- We offer a limited welcome to the temporary pause regarding ‘changes to curatorial staff to allow further consideration of revised proposals’. However, we note that this is to be done ‘with a view to bringing back a preferred model in a month or two’s time’. This is pretty vague to say the least. The current situation must be very difficult for the two ‘defined’ curatorial members of staff directly involved?
- It is stated that you are ‘confident’ this will result in new proposals that will ‘enhance our current offer’. What makes you ‘confident’ about these proposals? Who will be involved in exploring options and identifying a ‘preferred model’? What policy and plans will inform and ‘frame’ these options and any revised roles? What criteria will inform the selection of a ‘preferred model’? How can we share your confidence without more information and clarity regarding the context, process and options appraisal?
- Our original headline criticism regarding the lack of early consultation still stands. Why were these proposals developed without consultation with key local, regional and national stakeholders (including some potential funders)? It lacks logic and makes no sense. These are basic mistakes and errors of judgement. This absence of due process would suggest a lack of expertise and experience.
- It is stated that you are currently discussing emerging plans with ‘key stakeholders’ and that this ‘would involve a strong core team, enhanced partnership working with other expert institutions and access to ongoing independent, expert advice’. Again, why was this not your approach from the beginning when the original proposals were being considered and developed at least six months ago? You offer no evidence of who those current key stakeholders are, what informs those discussions or how they will be fed into the ‘emerging plans’.
- The Heritage Network is not aware of any local heritage ‘key stakeholders’ that have been involved in these late-in-the-day discussions. Please could you identify these recent consultees? We are disappointed that no discussions have taken place with The Heritage Network to date. Cllrs James Smith and Daniel Jellyman are routinely invited to meetings but have chosen not to share or discuss these proposals.
- Another major concern is that these discussions would appear to justify your confidence that the ‘core proposal of creating a single team to steward our two main museums at the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery (PMAG) and at Gladstone Pottery Museum (GPM) is a sound one’. How have you made that assessment? What criteria and analysis have you used? Please can any, or all, of that information be shared?

- You suggest that ‘through the process’ (presumably the Budget Consultation) a plan has emerged that ‘could see us able to enhance our ceramics curatorial offer in a way that would strengthen our available expertise and reach’. What is that ‘plan’? Is it a written plan? Is it possible to see a copy of the ‘plan that has emerged’? Can you share any background analysis, evidence or development work that has informed that plan?
- It is reported that you are ‘excited at this prospect’ and state that it is important that you ‘take the time to get any revised proposals right, not least in discussing these emerging plans with our key stakeholders’. Firstly, and once again, why was this approach not adopted at least six months ago when the original proposals were being considered and developed? Secondly, who are the local, regional and national key stakeholders you will be discussing these ‘emerging plans’ with? What is your timeframe for this engagement and partnership development? How and when will the results of these consultations be shared?
- We offer a cautious welcome to the Council’s revised commitment to maintain grant funding support to Ford Green Hall in 2022/23. However, these amendments and the reinstatement of 2022/23 grant for one year comes with a heavy-handed proviso issued to the independent trustees of Ford Green Hall. It states that they must ‘commit to work openly with us so that we can review the current plans and put in expert support to help them secure a sustainable platform as an independent trust’. This is a significant condition of grant, seemingly communicated within a wider public statement and imposed on an independent voluntary board of trustees as a diktat. This is pretty shocking in all honesty - surely, that should have been more carefully worded and discussions held behind closed doors?
- We offer a limited welcome to the Council’s revised commitment to ‘maintain grant funding support to Etruria Industrial Museum in 2022/23 (albeit ‘pending delivery of lease’). We also acknowledge and welcome the council’s commitment to ‘redouble’ its efforts with Etruria Industrial Museum.
- You state that ‘the relationship between production and exhibition of ceramics is central to the understanding of the history of the Potteries but it is a narrative that is not adequately expressed through our offer at the current time. We are determined to change that.’ Who has identified this? How was that conclusion reached? Is it expressed in a review or plan? Has this ‘identified issue’ previously been raised with curators and Museums Service staff? This would clearly be a professional curatorial decision taken by a professional curator (or not as the case maybe).
- You state that ‘it isn’t right that GPM currently has no relevant curatorial expertise’. This is factually incorrect. The Audience Development Manager and a number of other staff members do have curatorial skills and have been deploying them for years. These curatorial skills and experience have helped GPM to win a number of prestigious awards for museum management and cultural tourism. This suggests the existing team must be doing something right?
- You state that ‘if we do not take steps to develop Gladstone’s offer, the museum will not sustain and rare crafts could wither and die. We are not prepared for that to happen and therefore there has to be change if our museums are to thrive into the future.’ How has this been identified and who has identified it? Has there been a structured review? Is there a review document? Is it included in a plan? Has there been any expert-led or expert-informed review activity and/or development planning to identify and address these issues?
- You mention that ‘recovery from COVID-19 has led a great many heritage and culture venues to reflect on their opening times, but also commit to review.’ You indicate that you

will conduct a review of GPM (and PMAG?) and identify potential future opportunities. Has any recent review of either museum taken place? If it has can this be shared? If not, when will that take place? How will the review inform the 'refresh'? How will performance targets be identified, agreed and measured in relation to footfall and future opportunities to 'reopen both venues for longer periods'?

- It is disingenuous and misjudged to re-state that 'there was much misunderstanding and misrepresentation of our proposals' in relation to the retention of curatorial skills. There was no misrepresentation or misunderstanding. The original proposals involved losing one of the two senior curator roles, halving the retained curatorial expertise. These amendments provide an approximate two month pause but other comments suggest you will eventually lose one of the senior curator posts as originally proposed. You will also lose other staff members from the wider PMAG and GPM teams who also have curatorial skills and experience.
- You talk about Arts Council England, Historic England and Heritage Lottery and their focus on and increasing involvement in the city in more recent years. In reality, that interest and those partnerships have been hard won by many individuals and organisations including the Council. It's taken a lot longer than seven years to achieve the changing perceptions and renewed interest in Stoke-on-Trent's heritage and wider cultural offer. Many activists and organisations have been working away making incremental changes and more significant improvements; building strategic relationships and promoting the city's cultural offer and the wider reputation for decades, some for literally half a century. We are all 'custodians of it' and we all 'value it highly'. The city's 'narrative' has not been transformed over seven years. Narrative like culture is alive; it constantly changes and continues to morph and evolve. Our city's narrative relates to shared stories rooted in centuries of local life and distinctive industrial history. The Council is a valued and major stakeholder and custodian in this process but the evolving narrative belongs to us all.
- Statements like 'the partnership on offer at multiple levels' need to be explained and evidenced to have any meaning and credibility. Who are the partners? What are the 'partnerships on offer at multiple levels'?
- Statements like 'our determination to continue to build a city to be proud of, we are busy formulating a wide ranging strategy that will truly make the most of these amazing assets', again, lack any credibility given the incoherence of current proposals and major budget cuts and lack of evidence, partnership development and adopted plans.
- If you are 'determined to start the process of change'; when was this need for change identified? What review scope or analysis framed it? What consultation took place? What development process was adopted? Why have you presented pre-determined proposals for significant changes and major budget cuts if, as you identify, you wish to 'start the process of change'?
- Once again, comments that proclaim that you are 'confident that ultimately our museums will be stronger and more sustainable as a result' lack any evidence or basis and are both unhelpful and simply nonsensical.
- The current Leader and Council have played an important and positive role in relation to culture and heritage. However, you haven't created a 'step change' on your own. We recognise and acknowledge that the Council have had some successful and significant achievements in relation to heritage and led by example in relation to Town Hall renewal, the new Spitfire Gallery, etc. It has also worked hard and in close partnership with key stakeholders especially the more established arts and cultural organisations, and in

doing so, has been part of the collective achievements and positive changes that these consortia have been responsible for leading and delivering.

- You state that you 'view this as a positive opportunity that builds on the strong culture and heritage narrative the city has developed over the last seven years.' However it is clear from the huge outcry, and multitude of concerns raised, that the mismanagement of any kind of coherent process in relation to review, stakeholder consultation and partnership development has damaged that 'positive opportunity'. We think many 'stakeholders' will share our view that it would be good to see some admission and acknowledgment of the mishandled process and mistakes. Some genuine empathy, care and support for the Museums Service staff caught up in this mess is also a priority right now.
- The idea that you will be able to build on 'the goodwill that has come forward over recent weeks' is, bluntly, risible. The mismanagement of this process, lack of prior consultation and presentation of proposals that lack any evidence base, partnership development and therefore coherence has badly damaged the city's cultural brand value. We hope and believe that this is temporary and can be recovered. However, our collective cultural offer will be severely damaged and diminished if these proposals are enacted. The whole episode has been made much worse by poor communications throughout and not helped by increasingly strident public statements.
- The people of Stoke-on-Trent (and friends from much further afield) have communicated their passion and care for these publicly owned collections and museums. If the Leader and the Council do 'cherish our museums'; you need to prove it by putting an immediate stop to, and reverse where needed, all current actions in relation to these revised proposals and major budget cuts. You then need to adopt a professional and inclusive approach to review consultation and renewal plans for the Museums Service. You need to urgently engage with experts and key stakeholders to effectively start again.

Finally, we must repeat the last comments from our Budget Consultation. There is currently a 'heritage moment' in relation to the City of Stoke-on-Trent. These proposals are an attack on who we are and what the city stands for. As a Network they undermine our ability to deliver our aims.

There is public encouragement and positive challenge for change. We believe there is an opportunity for new and ambitious thinking. We need dynamic partnerships to unlock our city's internationally significant heritage and wider cultural offer - museums, collections and historic buildings.

We implore you to reach out, reconnect and build on our city's strong heritage and cultural partnerships. Please rethink these proposals - invest don't cut!

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Callaghan', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Danny Callaghan, Chair
On Behalf of The Heritage Network for Stoke-on-Trent