



2019-2024 Forward Plan

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1. Introducing the Museum Service

“North Hertfordshire Museum aims to increase the understanding and enjoyment of the culture, heritage and environment of North Hertfordshire. We use our collections to tell the stories of the people, past and present, who have lived and worked here. Our vision is to create a welcoming museum that plays an active role in the life of the District.”

North Hertfordshire Museum in Brand Street, in the centre of Hitchin, opened fully on 6 July 2019. It is open Tuesday to Saturday 10.30am to 4.30pm, and Sundays 11am to 3pm, and closed to the public on Mondays..

Until 2012, North Hertfordshire District Council’s Museum Service comprised three sites: Hitchin Museum & Art Gallery, Letchworth Museum & Art Gallery and the Burymead Museum Resource Centre. The two museums closed in September 2012, and over the next few years their staff and collections combined to form a new North Hertfordshire Museum, telling the story of the whole district. North Hertfordshire Museum has three main galleries, a dedicated space for major temporary exhibitions, a display wall for local artists, a local study centre, an education room, shop and cafe. Burymead Resource Centre is still the main museum store. North Hertfordshire Museum, and the adjoining Hitchin Town Hall events venue, are managed together as part of North Hertfordshire District Council’s Commercialisation Department.

North Hertfordshire Museum offers:

- An accessible and welcoming building
- Well-designed modern museum displays
- High-quality temporary exhibitions
- Digital interactives for all the family
- Events and activities for all ages
- Outreach work throughout the District
- Education work and Loans Scheme
- Local Studies Centre
- Support for other local museums and cultural activities

The Museum Team

Head of Service /Corporate Manager: Steve Crowley, **Service Director, Commercial**

Robert Orchard **Operations and Facilities Manager**

Portfolio Holder(s): Cllr Keith Hoskins Cllr Helen Oliver

Ros Allwood

Cultural Services Manager

Manages museum service, plus other District cultural support

Keith Fitzpatrick-Matthews

Museum Curator and Heritage Access Officer

Cares for the museum and its collections and promotes the heritage of the district

Matthew Platt

Assistant Curator

Supports the curator with collections care, exhibitions and events

Cas Sanders

Learning Officer

Educational work with all age groups and abilities, in the museum and the community

Rebecca Barkus

Activities Officer

Engages the public with events and activities

Ian Day

Museum Technician

Technical support for exhibitions, displays, education, and events

Visitor Service Assistants

Visitor and event assistance, invigilation, covers the reception desk:

Carys Breeze

Brenda Downie

William Stafford

Nicola Viinikka

The Visitor Services team is also supplemented by casual staff:

Patricia Day

Alison Fell-Gordon

Nicky Nicoll

Joelle Maya van Giap

Town Hall and Museum Support Officers

Debbie Angell, Magda Rea, Caroline Traylen

North Hertfordshire Museum – brief description

North Hertfordshire. Museum aims to bring the history of the North Hertfordshire district to life through a wide range of displays. The collections include archaeology, art, costume, natural history, social history, football, suffrage, Hertfordshire Yeomanry. The museum is fully accessible, with a lift to all floors.

A large showcase in the entrance area displays iconic objects from both the old museums. There is an accessible reception desk, a shop selling exclusive local cards and gifts, and a café selling a selection of locally sourced food and drinks.

In the first ground floor gallery, **Discovering North Herts**, the displays are chronological, starting 90 million years ago. They include a local mammoth's tusk, superb Iron Age and Roman archaeology, and material relating to the founding of the world's first Garden City. Modern technology is incorporated throughout the gallery, with an Augmented Reality map of the district; an updated Pepper's Ghost in a model of The Biggin, a local historic building; and a large natural history case, the **Day and Night Garden** with bird and animal sounds. The air-conditioned **temporary exhibition gallery** downstairs has been designed and built to Government Indemnity standards, allowing the museum to borrow high quality exhibitions from national museums.

On the lower ground floor is the Local Studies Centre, with a collection of unique local archives.

Upstairs the **Living in North Herts.** gallery has themed displays on a range of social history subjects, starting with 'Living on the Land' and finishing with 'Cradle to Grave'. There are family-friendly interactives and Pathé newsreels throughout.

Also upstairs, the **Terrace Gallery** has five main showcases, featuring football, world cultures, art, suffrage and people who have made a mark on the district. There is a mini cinema with animations of local folk tales. The Arches display wall is a temporary exhibition space for local artists.

• Where are we now?

North Hertfordshire Museum first opened to the public on 7 October 2017. At that date, only the ground floor exhibition gallery and 'Discovering North Herts' gallery were fully open. Access was through Hitchin Town Hall. The upstairs 'Living in the North Herts.' gallery could only be seen on

pre-booked guided tours, using the rear service staircase. The lift and main staircase were not accessible until February 2019, following the Council's acquisition of the land formerly known as 14 and 15 Brand Street, which forms the museum entrance. The museum opened fully on 6 July 2019. The Museum Service gained over £1million in grant-aid from the National Lottery Heritage Fund in two stages, in 2012 and 2014, for a project entitled 'Unlocking the Heritage of North Hertfordshire'. This had four main aims:

- ***Access - To enable access for everyone to the heritage of North Hertfordshire***
- ***Improvement - To improve the visitor experience***
- ***Conservation -To improve the conservation, storage and display of this heritage***
- ***Sustainability - Long-term sustainability for the North Hertfordshire Museums Service***

This project aimed to deliver the following benefits (*Unlocking the Heritage of North Herts.*, Phase 2, Section 3b.3):

- *Improved physical access to the museum, enabling all visitors to enjoy, use and learn from the heritage, in one easily accessible building. **Achieved***
- *Modern museum displays, with more of the heritage displayed, using community participation to choose items. The displays will combine items from both existing museums and the stores, in a completely new way. For the first time, objects from the many villages of North Herts. will be displayed. **Achieved***
- *A dedicated learning and activity space, for use by schools during the day and special interest groups/adult learning in the evening **Achieved***
- *A range of new learning opportunities for schools, based on the new displays **Achieved***
- *Opportunities for volunteers of all ages to look after and use the heritage. **Achieved***
- *Free up museum staff to work on the heritage rather than spending time managing two elderly buildings **Old museums still used for storage, so are still taking up staff time***
- *Training opportunities for young people, building on our successful Future Jobs Fund placements **Achieved***
- *Give easy access to local history (archives, maps, directories, newspapers, photographs, recordings, films) **Achieved***
- *Reduce physical barriers to accessing learning and activities, by providing lifts and accessible toilets **Achieved***

These aims, which museum staff have been working towards since 2012, and which feature on all previous service and action plans since that date, have almost all been fully realised in the new museum, which has:

- **Excellent visitor numbers**

Since the July opening, the museum has been extremely busy, with visitors averaging well over 1000 a week. This is more than projected, and extremely pleasing, but it is too soon yet to see whether these figures will be sustained. The fact that there is now an excellent café on the premises, run by Hitchin Town Hall, is a benefit for our visitors, and another incentive to visit.

- **Good feedback**

'The new look museum exceeded all my expectations...there is so much to see; the display is clear and informative. A big 'thank you' for all your hard work in making it happen.'

'Wonderful museum. Fabulous collections and staff.'

Feedback on social media, on the museum's 'Viewpoint' feedback kiosk, and in person, is consistently high, with a ranking of 4.8 out of 5 on Facebook, and 89% Excellent/Good on the 'Viewpoint' kiosk. These rankings are both increasing the longer we are open. Talks are generally selling out, and children's workshops are booking up in the first couple of days of advertising. Events are publicised on the museum website, on social media (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) and on the museum's own Newsletter, which is sent to a mailing list of over 2000. The positive feedback is proving that the long period of community consultation about what should be displayed in the new museum was worthwhile; with visitors telling staff how pleased they are to see favourite items from the old museums, as well pieces from the stores that have never been on display.

- **Local Partnerships**

Museum partnerships have proved crucial over the last couple of years, enabling, amongst other benefits, the continued employment of a Museum Audience Development Officer using Arts Council, and then NLHF, funding in partnership with Stevenage Museum, after the original NLHF funding for this post had ceased. The book *'Suffrage Stories; Tales from Knebworth, Stevenage, Hitchin and Letchworth'* was written and produced by staff from four local museums, as part of an NLHF project, and is a lasting achievement which would have been impossible for any one partner. Much of *'North Herts. Undaunted'*, our 2018 suffrage exhibition, transferred to Stevenage

Museum as part of this project. In 2018 the museum was part of a countywide *Museums in Motion* project, where young people from Young Carers Crew (formerly Herts. Young Carers) came to the museum for a week-long dance and technology project, based around items in the collection.

- **Keen Volunteers**

Volunteers have been extremely important to the museum service during the run-up to full opening, and the museum has a full complement of regular weekly volunteers. Current volunteer tasks include digitising the old Accession Registers, scanning historic newspapers, and organising the Local Studies Room, with its historic archive collection. Other volunteers provide visitor service assistance, and help with children's workshops.

- **Museum storage**

The museum service has material stored on four sites. Costume, fine art and local archives are in new purpose-built storage on site at North Herts. Museum. Both Letchworth and Hitchin Museum still have material stored on site; the majority is boxed up on racking at Letchworth Museum, although Hitchin Museum still houses a few artworks and a large number of archive boxes. Books from the libraries of both old museums are boxed up at Letchworth Museum.

The main museum store is the Museum Resource Centre at Burymead Road, Hitchin. This is home to the archaeology bulk store, the archaeology archive, the main social history store, the natural history store and the school loan boxes, as well as the archaeology and natural history libraries. There is no spare storage space at Burymead, and no environmental control. There are also unused offices at Burymead, which are overcrowded and in need of attention.

- **Where do we need to be?**

In all its future planning, North Hertfordshire Museum needs to use the Council's priorities as the basis of its Business Planning Process, as these identify the areas where the Council will concentrate resources. However the museum plan also incorporates the three main Museum Accreditation areas:

- Organisational health
- Managing Collections
- Users and their experiences

The Council's Priorities for the District 2020-25 are as follows:

- Be a more welcoming and inclusive **council**
- Building thriving and resilient **communities**
- Responding to challenges to the **environment**
- Enabling an enterprising and co-operative **economy**
- Supporting the delivery of good quality and affordable **housing**

How the Museum Service links to the NHDC Priorities

Priority	Link to Priority
<i>Be a more welcoming and inclusive council</i>	North Hertfordshire Museum aims to become a welcoming and inclusive venue in the centre of Hitchin, encouraging visitors of all ages, and from all backgrounds. The museum is physically accessible, with lifts and large print labels, and a signing member of staff.
<i>Building thriving and resilient communities</i>	The museum displays are based on extensive community consultation. We hope that by learning more about the development of their towns and villages, visitors gain the sense of place that enables them to feel safe, healthy, connected, and able to help themselves and each other.
<i>Responding to challenges to the environment</i>	The Museum Service is the repository for material relating to the historic development of the District, including its natural history. These unique specimens support research on climate change, evolution and pollution. The Learning Service introduces children to challenges in the eco-system, and the importance of recycling. The café does not use single-use plastics.
<i>Enabling an enterprising and co-operative economy</i>	By 'buying local' where possible, the museum shop and cafe both support local enterprise, helping build a resilient local economy. Hitchin Town Hall and North Herts. Museum together act as a magnet venue for visitors, boosting footfall in Hitchin Town Centre.

How the Museum Service links to Museums Accreditation Priorities

Our Aims:

- **increase the understanding and enjoyment of the culture, heritage and environment of North Hertfordshire**
- **to improve museum storage, with one good quality store on a nearby external site**
- **continue to add catalogue entries and images to eHive.**
- **completing the backlog process by 2024**
- **to complete the digitisation of the Accessions Registers of both museums by 2021, using volunteers to do this**
- **to listen to our visitors and make changes in response to feedback**
- **make more community partnerships, particularly with groups related to health and social care**

Priority	Link to Priority
<i>Organisational health</i>	In addition to the new museum, North Hertfordshire District Council now owns the land on which it stands, which was the subject of a dispute. This has given the museum far greater future security. The museum is a flagship project for NHDC, of which it is extremely proud. It is committed to the future running of the museum, on which it has spent a large amount of capital.
<i>Managing Collections</i>	<p>North Hertfordshire Museum aims to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase the understanding and enjoyment of the culture, heritage and environment of North Hertfordshire <p>by using the collections to tell the stories of the people, past and present, who have lived and worked here.</p> <p>The main collections management aim in the next few years is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to improve museum storage, with one good quality store on a nearby external site <p>We will do this by replacing the current store at Burymead Road, and also by emptying the two old museums so that all storage is – apart from items in store at North Herts Museum - on one site.</p> <p>Almost all objects on display in the museum are catalogued on eHive, our collections management system. These all have images, but there are still many</p>

	<p>items in store that are not yet catalogued on this CMS. We aim to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>continue to add catalogue entries and images to eHive.</i> <p>There is also a collection backlog that staff will now begin to assess, with the aim of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>completing the backlog process by 2024</i> <p>The museum also aims:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>to complete the digitisation of the Accessions Registers of both museums by 2021, using volunteers to do this</i> <p>Staff will continue to research the collections, as a result of public enquiries, and also for in-house exhibitions and displays. The museum will continue to conserve its collections as necessary, as per the Care & Conservation Plan</p>
<p><i>Users and their experiences</i></p>	<p>North Hertfordshire Museum aims to become a welcoming museum that plays an active role in the life of the District. It does this by being in an accessible building, whose layout and displays were designed to solve the problems reported by users to both the old museums.</p> <p>However, visitors are still in a honeymoon period with the new museum, delighted with everything on offer. This will not last, and we aim:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>to listen to our visitors and make changes in response to feedback</i> <p>We will do this by changes to the displays or to the interpretation. We gather feedback through by feedback forms after events, the Viewpoint survey kiosk, online social media feedback, and in person.</p> <p>The museum also aims to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>make more community partnerships, particularly with groups related to health and social care</i>

4. How do we get there?

The main actions and planned outcomes are outlined in the attached Service Action Plan, Appendix A. This is a live document, discussed and updated regularly, in team meetings as well as during regular performance reviews. Given that the museum has only just fully opened, the next

few months will be spent getting back to the general museum work that has had to take a back seat in the run-up to opening. Staff will assess the day-to-day activity and feedback, making changes as necessary

The SWOT analysis below shows strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities to the service.

<p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible new museum with café • Town Centre location • Helpful welcoming staff • Free entry • Good social media coverage • High quality exhibitions • Displays of items from around the District • Family friendly interactives and events • Flexible-use Learning Centre • Dedicated Local Studies Centre 	<p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low staffing levels, leading to curatorial staff having to cover VSA roles more often than desirable • New displays may generate more enquiries than staff can manage, leading to reputational damage • Succession planning; some curatorial staff may be retiring in the next few years • Local Studies Centre only open by appointment because of staffing levels • Patchy quality of museum storage • Backlog of accessioning needs attention
<p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income generation - set up a Friends or supporters' group • Income generation - charge for some exhibitions • Improved storage • Museum Lates • Revamped Loans Service • New relationship with schools • Dementia café • Work with home school families • Joint working with café and Town Hall • Improved marketing 	<p style="text-align: center;">THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic uncertainty due to Brexit, leading to cuts in revenue and capital • Lack of capital funding for new museum store • Unsuccessful grant applications leading to loss of Audience Development post • Worry about Council provision of non statutory services in the future • Poor financial performance of Town Hall and café leading to Council rethink of the facility

Appendix A (Museum Service Action Plan) attached

This plan to be reviewed annually on 01 August, next review 01/08/20