

# Cultural Services Peer Challenge **Epping Forest District Council**

25 & 26 April 2018

Feedback Report

## 1. Executive Summary

Epping Forest District Council's (EFDC) Museums, Heritage and Culture Service (MHC) provides management services for Epping Forest District Museum in Waltham Abbey and Lowewood Museum in Hoddesdon for Broxbourne Borough Council under a Service Level Agreement (SLA). Both museums are Arts Council England (ACE) accredited and provide a range of cultural programmes across the Epping Forest district and Broxbourne borough.

The excellent service appears to have universal support amongst staff, politicians, stakeholders and partners. The council corporate plan makes reference to the value of cultural services and the draft business plan makes clear the linkages between MHC services and its contribution to the delivery of council priorities. To maintain this level of backing will require a programme of continuing advocacy and communication to maintain the high levels of buy in to the aspirations of the service. We noted that the council has a strong commitment to funding cultural and leisure services, with the proposal to build a new £9.5 million sports centre in Waltham Abbey bearing further testimony to this objective.

The MHC service has an enviable track record of securing inward investment. Most notably, £1.65 million of Heritage Lottery Funding (HLF) for the £2 million renovation and extension of the museum in Waltham Abbey and the £312,000 completion of the No Borders project. EFDC took the lead in delivering this project in partnership with Broxbourne and Chelmsford.

MHC is a very self-aware service and is making good progress in formulating its forward agenda. This will be set out in the service's business plan (2018 – 2023) which is currently in draft form and will be signed off in the near future. The plan has been informed through a series of staff and stakeholder forums. The business plan will set out an annual action plan that will be subject to scrutiny by the council. The business plan will address the need for a more robust performance management regime across the service. Monitoring and evaluation will be enhanced through the adoption of a bespoke toolkit co-designed with Red Quadrant, and funded by Arts Council England through its support for the No Borders project. The peer team noted that the business plan is based upon Arts Council England's model for arts and cultural organisations template.

The MHC service exemplifies good partnership working. The service has led on developing good working relationships with neighbouring Broxbourne and Chelmsford councils. It has been instrumental in support to the development of the new Culture without Borders Trust. MHC appears to have a real and tangible belief in the benefits of partnership working. It informs all of their actions and they do not develop projects/programmes in isolation. The emerging business plan will be a significant document because its formulation has involved a wide range of stakeholders (arts and cultural sectors, business interests, neighbouring district, borough and county councils, Epping Forest Town and parish councils and external funders).

MHC is aware that it needs to refocus its efforts on commercial activity. The rationale for this approach requires further consideration and some guiding principles need to be agreed. For example, income generation is important but not at the expense of access for all. The disparity of views about what commercialisation really means requires some

consolidation of viewpoints. A renewed focus on financial monitoring and reporting is recommended. We think that is a legitimate area for the new development trust to become involved in.

The potential for delivering services on-line requires further consideration. The council website is being reviewed and MHC needs to decide what it wants as a digital presence. The alternative means of making the collections more accessible may improve both access and income generation opportunity.

We think that the coming together of the museum and arts services in the renovated museum building offers the potential to rebrand the building as a cultural hub. This idea may be further enhanced through collaboration with the adjacent Waltham Abbey library operated by Essex County Council. This will also provide a channel for renewed marketing activity.

We were pleased to meet a group of enthusiastic and capable stakeholders, from across a range of cultural interest groups. They are keen to be actively involved in the further development of culture and think that it may be useful for them to meet in a more formal setting to engage with MHC services and the wider cultural partnerships. This group also identified the potential of using the Epping Forest Tourism and Visitor Board to promote MHC activity.

## **2. Key recommendations**

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

### **Prioritise the completion of the business plan (2018 – 2023) and implementation of the new staffing structure**

Both the business plan (2018 – 2023) and the impending staffing restructure require immediate management attention. The peer team viewed drafts for both of these items. The business plan will be an important document in terms of consolidating the focus for future service activity and development. It also provides the opportunity to consolidate in one document a number of previous papers that have considered fundraising/income generation/sponsorship, audience development, review of previous development plans, support for partnership working and for the relationship with the emerging trust.

The council is working through a transformation programme currently. The proposed MHC staffing restructure conforms to the corporate programme and is designed to enhance the capacity of the team to continue to deliver the best possible service. Some minor amendments are required and then the new structure can be fully implemented. It is important that this work is undertaken as a priority to ensure that new roles can be aligned with the roll out of the business plan. The capacity of MHC is greatly enhanced through the work of the cohort of volunteers. The peer team met with a group of these stakeholders, who are keen to further support the MHC, and expressed particular interest in helping promote cultural services and outreach work.

## **Consider the value of a developing cultural forum**

The peer team have suggested the potential of developing a cultural forum. It is open for discussion as to who the partners will be. The current partnership arrangements between Epping Forest, Broxbourne and Chelmsford would seem to be a sensible starting point. The emerging trust would be enabled in deciding its work programme by engaging with the cultural forum. This approach may also be attractive to funding partners, such as Heritage Lottery Fund and Arts Council England.

## **Review capacity when considering new projects**

The MHC is very self-aware and is realigning its staff to better reflect the future work programme. Historically the service has stretched the boundaries, entering into an SLA with Broxbourne to manage and operate the Lowewood Museum and to partner with Chelmsford and to support the development of the new trust. The service has also been very successful in making bids for external funding and managing new projects. However with the scale of ambition exemplified in the new draft business plan, we think that the MHC team will be fully engaged in delivering the proposed work programme. Any significant new project/development should be subject to a resource assessment. An example is the support that EFDC may give to Broxbourne in relocating its Lowewood museum collection to the Spinning Wheel site in Hoddesdon. In our opinion this lies outside the current SLA arrangement, and will need alternative resourcing. Additional advice may be available from the LGA Productivity Experts Programme <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/efficiency-and-income-generation/productivity-experts-programme/apply>

## **Agree a coherent commercial approach**

The peer team identified a range of differing views about what a commercial approach really means to a museum, heritage and culture service. This fragmentation is further compounded as the council has commissioned a number of external advisers to provide advice on the subject. This information is useful background material but the MHC should take time to determine how it will progress its efforts to become more commercial. There are a range of possible approaches and the situation will be alleviated as certain posts within the new structure have specific responsibility for commercial activities. The income targets could be more ambitious, and we understand that overachieved income can be carried forward or used to subsidise events/exhibitions. The emerging business plan will help unify and cohere the disparate views on this subject.

## **Take a strategic approach to outreach and embrace hard to reach groups**

MHC is aware that certain groups are underrepresented in their use of the service. This constitutes a gap in the knowledge about these groups' requirements and a renewed focus on engagement with these groups is desirable. It may well be that the council corporately has ways of engaging with these groups and MHC could link into this data. The development trust will also have, as part of its remit, the objective of engaging with these groups and individuals.

## **Establish a cultural strategy**

The peer team suggest that you consider coordinating the development of a cultural strategy for the Epping Forest district, its partners and stakeholders. This will help to focus and promote the region's cultural offer, and advocate how culture can enrich and transform the lives of everyone in the district. It could demonstrate how culture can be used to strengthen the individual, collective and economic wellbeing of the region and set out shared intentions for the next 5 -10 years.

## **Agree the relationship with the development trust**

The peer team applaud the support that MHC and the council has given to the formation of the Culture Without Borders Development Trust. It is early days and the trustees are just starting to explore how they can work together and how best to support the continuing development of culture. Terms of reference are still being agreed, but we anticipate that the Trust will provide oversight on:

- helping to develop and promote local arts and cultural provision across the Epping Forest and Broxbourne areas
- sharing information and good practice
- identifying areas for collaboration
- supporting advocacy work for local arts and culture services
- embedding a clear role for museum heritage and culture in a wider agenda.

The peer team noted that the trust has been successful in helping fundraise, £13,000 for the purchase of the Willingale Ring for the Epping Forest district museum collection.

## **Prioritise a dedicated website, building on the success of social media campaigns**

We are aware that the council website is to be redesigned/upgraded. It is important that MHC either acquires its own area on the corporate website or sets up its own discrete web presence. The Trust has some expertise in this area and should be actively engaged in this development work. The Trust is likely to develop its own web presence that will promote culture widely across Epping Forest and Broxbourne. With suitable linkages this will benefit the promotion and presentation of the MHC services.

## **Explore the viability of digitalisation to bring greater access to collections and the potential of commercial opportunities**

As the collections policy is under review, it is timely to consider how objects can be best presented in different ways. In addition the service is aiming to extend its reach and digitalisation of exhibitions, collections and records is one way in which to do this. The opportunity for this to improve the service's commercial activities will also be important to consider. The work of Walter Spradbery being a good example of the potential of providing greater access and improving the income stream, via digital access and merchandising. The Mendoza Review – (an independent review of museums in England November 2017) states that, "there is a need understanding of the wide potential of digital in museums. Examples include display and interpretation, collections, communications, data – and the

need for a strategic approach to embedding tools and technologies into every aspect of museums' work”

See:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/673935/The Mendoza Review an independent review of museums in England.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/673935/The_Mendoza_Review_an_independent_review_of_museums_in_England.pdf)

### **Review the collections and disposal policy**

MHC manages 100,000 objects in its Epping Forest collection and a further 50,000 in Lowewood, this figure includes bulk archaeological archives. Additional storage is urgently required and work is underway to identify alternative facilities for this purpose. There is a well-considered Collections Development Policy and this makes provision for both the acquisition of new items and the themes and priorities for rationalization and disposal. In the context of the new business plan we suggest that a further collections policy review is undertaken.

## **3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach**

### **The peer team**

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at Epping were:

- Councillor Nick Worth - Executive Member for Culture & Emergency Services Lincolnshire County Council and Deputy Leader South Holland Council
- Tony Witton - Cultural and Creative Economy Service Manager, Kent County Council
- Mark Harrison - LGA Peer Challenge Manager

### **Scope and focus**

The peer team considered the following:

1. EFDC MHC capacity to deliver its ambition; is a small organisation being overstretched?
2. Are the key areas of focus the right ones?, with specific reference to:
  - engaging with harder to reach audiences to inform service planning
  - building sustainable fundraising support for MHC and the new development trust
  - providing off site services across Epping and Broxbourne
  - maximising the benefits of partnership working.
3. Provide members with an external perspective on current processes and emerging options?
4. Provide a view on whether local need is being met, programme mix and approach to income generation?

5. Is there clarity in the strategic vision of the MHC service and have all service delivery and development options been fully considered?

### **The peer challenge process**

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent two days onsite at Epping Museum, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 25 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from more than 12 meetings, visits to key sites in the area and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 75 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending more than 2 weeks in Epping.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit (25 – 26 April 2018). In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

## **4. Feedback**

### **The service is excellent with demonstrable passion and commitment from councillors, staff and volunteers, and this is clearly demonstrated at all levels**

The peer team saw much evidence of an excellent well run service, supported by enthusiastic and professional staff. There appears to be a high level of political and stakeholder support for the service and this enthusiasm has helped in securing additional external funding. The newly refurbished museum in Waltham Abbey shows the benefit of this shared ambition. There is a very clear appreciation of the main purpose of service delivery, and that is to collect, preserve and promote the heritage of the Epping Forest district and to provide opportunities for people to engage in wider cultural opportunities. This energy should be nurtured through the positive engagement of volunteers, stakeholders, historical groups and partners through the development of a shared cultural strategy

### **The direction of travel is positive**

The service continues to work on plans that aim to further enhance service provision and maximise the opportunities that partnership working with neighbouring councils may bring. Although a recent bid to the Arts Council for National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status did not receive funding, it was well received and scored strongly in the assessment. The workstreams set out in the NPO bid will be incorporated within the emerging business plan 2018 -2023. Councillors can be reassured that the the key areas of focus are the right ones, with specific reference to:

- engaging with harder to reach audiences to inform service planning
- building sustainable fundraising support for MHC and the new development trust
- providing off site services across Epping Forest and Broxbourne
- maximising the benefits of partnership working.

### **Capacity is currently being managed but is near a tipping point**

The service is aware that its ambitious programme and development of new work strands is requiring much effort from the staff. A restructuring is close to implementation, and this aims to ensure that the necessary skills are in place to reflect the requirements of the business plan delivery. The peer team recommend that if any significant new projects are envisaged, such as the relocation of the Lowewood museum collection, then additional staffing resources will be necessary. It would be sensible to keep the new staff arrangements under review post restructure to ensure that the new roles align with the delivery requirements of the business plan.

### **Vision and ambition exist but need to be agreed by everyone**

Much work has been done to identify future vision and ambition for the service. The peer team viewed a number of consultancy advisory papers. These are helpful but disparate in their advice, and we think that a coherent view could be set out in the new business plan and potentially supported by the development of a partnership cultural strategy. Once the “single” plan is agreed it would be useful to share its content with partners and the wider



public. The peer team was pleased to see that the cultural offer is referenced a number of times in the Epping Forest DC corporate plan.

### **A risk the service is over reliant on external funding, and this needs to be considered alongside a coherent commercial approach**

For a district council the service has been remarkably successful in securing external funding. This has resulted in inward investment, to renovate and expand the Epping museum (£1.65M HLF), two rounds of funding from the Arts Council Museum Resilience fund to explore a range of development initiatives (£270,000), around broadening fundraising, commercial activities and supporting audience development and diversity. The service is well funded to continue to maintain its core activities, but will continue to require a renewed focus on an enhanced commercial approach to maintain momentum and to ensure resilience in a changing political environment.

The peer team note that MHC continues to successfully apply for external grants, most recently:

- HLF funding for an exhibition by local artist Walter Spradbery (£40,000)
- HLF funding for the celebration of 100 years of St. Catherine's School (£10,000)
- Arts Mark from ACE (£5,000)
- Funding from various sources for the purchase and display of the Willingale Ring (£13,000)

### **A more strategic approach needs to be taken to audience development and programming**

The peer team saw evidence of innovative programming and efforts to reach new audiences. It is not clear how the hard to reach groups are targeted and the location of the service in Waltham Abbey may mean that other parts of the district are not as well served. However, staff are aware of this and are working to support audience development and diversity. Some further work will be required in this area to ensure that all sectors of the Epping Forest District community are being served. It would be useful to undertake an Equality Impact Assessment to assess the effect of the service changes upon service delivery. The recently completed No Borders visitor survey (the audience agency March 2018) provides the profiles of current visitors and audience characteristics. There are opportunities to share learning between museums/cultural services, with a view to targeting under - represented visitor types to engage in cultural activity. The report further recommends that individual museums use the visitor data to produce their own audience development plans.

### **A shared cultural strategy may unlock additional resources and opportunities**

The MHC service has a demonstrable and successful track record of working with neighbouring boroughs. The development of a cross district cultural strategy could be useful in raising public awareness of the culture, museum and arts across the sub region. A shadow independent trust Culture Without Borders Development Trust is registered as a company limited by guarantee and is awaiting final approval, for charitable status, from the Charity Commission. The trust has been established to raise funds and promote cultural services across Epping Forest and neighbouring Broxbourne. The development of a

cultural strategy will help shape the work of the trust, its relationship with in house services and clarify pan border cultural objectives and responsibilities.

## **5. Next steps**

### **Immediate next steps**

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership will want to reflect on these findings and suggestions in order to determine how the organisation wishes to take things forward.

As part of the peer challenge process, there is an offer of further activity to support this (there would be a charge for this). The LGA is well placed to provide additional support, advice and guidance on a number of the areas for development and improvement and we would be happy to discuss this. Gary Hughes, Principal Adviser is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association (LGA). His contact details are: Email [gary.hughes@local.gov.uk](mailto:gary.hughes@local.gov.uk)

In the meantime we are keen to continue the relationship we have formed with the Council throughout the peer challenge. We will endeavour to provide signposting to examples of practice and further information and guidance about the issues we have raised in this report to help inform ongoing consideration.