

Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Agenda
Item No.

Report of Deputy Chief Executive (Place)

to

Place Scrutiny

on

10th July 2017

Report prepared by: Ciara Phipps, Assistant Curator of Social
History

Southend Museums' Large Object Social History Collection

Place Scrutiny Item
Executive Councillor: Councillor Ann Holland
Part 1 (Public Agenda Item)

1. Purpose of the Report

To acquaint Members with the large object social history collection of Southend Museums Service and set out a future plan for maximising related resources.

2. Recommendations

That Members views are sought in advance of a Cabinet report on the proposals for the future of the Museum Service's large object social history collection.

3. Background

3.1 Southend Museums Service's 'large' object collection

Southend Central Museum is fully accredited by Arts Council England and is curated by a professionally trained team.

The museum service currently holds a varied collection of 'large' objects within the social history collection. Given their relevance and importance to the area, the key items within this collection include a complete C.1875 farming wagon, printing presses and all associated equipment from the Padgett print studio, a prototype television and large floor radios included in our extensive EKCO collection.

Over the years, the museum has acquired a number of fireplaces and surrounds with no context or information, damaged domestic wares with no provenance, and replica furniture that has no connection to either of our historic properties. With little or no relevance to Southend, the community, or to our current collections development policy approved by Cabinet in 2014, these large objects are taking up a significant amount of valuable storage space, which could be used for objects that are more appropriate and for better storage of the large objects we currently have and any future acquisitions to the collection.

It is essential to develop and maintain the large objects that will be vital in telling the stories of the area in an accessible, innovative and exciting way in any future displays within the museum service. Given this, it is essential to the care and storage of these objects, that we can fully access each object and add any other relevant and interesting items to the collection when they become available. This is currently not possible given the overcrowding of our storage space with irrelevant or incomplete large objects.

3.2 Proposals

It is proposed that this collection of large objects is considerably rationalised in order to prepare for and focus our collections, in order to adhere to standards of best practice within the museum, in which rationalisation is an essential activity. The museum plans to dispose of objects that are badly damaged, have no relevance to the local area, no research value or significance, and will not be displayed within the new museum. This process will be undertaken according to guidelines set forth by the Museums Association Code of Ethics and the Museums Association Disposals Toolkit. The objects in question will go through the ethical disposal process, which involves using the Collections Trust scoring system to assess each object, formally offering the objects to other museums for acquisition, after which objects can be put up for sale to generate income for the museum stores, and finally if no alternative option is found, disposed of.

This rationalisation would be the first phase of a larger rationalisation project undertaken on the social history collection as a whole, however to begin the process it is essential to start with the largest and most difficult objects to store. If this collection is not reduced in volume, other more relevant and important objects will suffer given the lack of access and space within our current storage facilities to sufficiently care for and interpret them. This rationalisation would provide us with much needed space in order to collect and accept donations of relevant, interesting and important objects into the collection.

3.3 The Future of the Large Objects collection

In the short term, the assistant curator of Social History and the conservator of the museum service are assessing the large objects collection for its condition, relevance, storage needs and for potential future display.

- First action will be to rationalise the collection by judicious disposal. A significant proportion of the large objects collection appears to be unaccessioned and therefore never officially entered into the museum collection. With the original donors consent, where possible, transfer to other registered museums (always the first choice); sale, or in the case of those in particularly poor condition, disposed of.
- In the event of sold items, all funds go towards the conservation and packaging of those that remain and ring-fenced for the on-going work of Southend Museums. They would not be part of any Council budget savings.
- A number of accessioned objects have been identified which are damaged and or irrelevant to the Museum Service's requirements and it is proposed that these too are disposed of. Many of the objects are duplicates and once again have no relevance to the area or the community.
- The Museums Service intends to place notices in the Museums Journal (the museums professional publication) inviting other registered museums to express an interest.
- The medium term plan is for the remaining material to be reorganised and stored in its current offsite store in Tickfield. Here the material will be accessed and engaged with during store tours, curatorial talks, future museum display, and interpretation planning.
- Having the space to move around the objects, care and conserve them more appropriately, and for the public to interact with them, is something this project will facilitate.

3.4 Suggested timetable for the large objects rationalisation project

An indicative timetable would be:

September-October 2017	Sorting and listing the large objects. Separation of the objects into accessioned and unaccessioned groups. Moving them all to assess each one.
November 2017-January 2018	Identification of unwanted large objects based on their condition, relevance and their potential for future display. Offer the unwanted objects to other registered museums via the Museums Journal disposals section.

March 2018	Agree next steps of remaining objects.
April-June 2018	Disposal of unwanted and damaged large objects that have not been allocated to different museums or ethically sold.
June-August 2018	Reorganisation of the large objects store to ensure each of the remaining objects can be accessed, condition checked and located.
September 2018	New store tour to the public to encourage visitors to see our newly accessible large objects and 'stars' of the new museum.

4. Other Options

The only alternative option would be to not undertake this project. This would mean we would continue to have overcrowded, inaccessible and inappropriate storage conditions. This option is not suitable given the responsibility the Museums Service has to care for the collections and potentially risks museum accreditation

The success and development of the service will be determined by the large rationalisation project as a whole, which this smaller pilot project falls into. Rationalisation is standard practice within the museum sector and ensures best practice in collections care. In order to build audiences, care for collections appropriately, and to develop interpretation, it is essential to have organised, high quality and relevant collections, which can be cared for correctly and are accessible.

Reasons for Recommendations

The recommendation is essential to the maintenance and development of the Museums Service and our collections. According to accreditation standards and ethical best practice set out in the Museums Associations Code of Ethics, it is vital to maintain collections for future generations by incorporating responsible disposal into the museums long-term collection development policy.

5. Corporate Implications

5.1 Contribution to Council's Vision and Critical Priorities

Part of the council's vision for a 'better Southend' is to be achieved by having a museum service that is efficiently run and organised, and itself has a clear vision of what it wishes to achieve. These proposals do exactly that. This section of the collections will be more coherently and efficiently organised, focused on the heritage of Southend, more economical to maintain and far more accessible to both our staff and customers. These proposals strongly conform to the Council's Critical Priority 6 'Become a high performing organisation'.

5.2 Resource Implications (Finance, People, Property)

At present, the work on the large objects collection is being conducted as part of normal museum activities.

5.3 Legal Implications

There are no significant legal issues raised by these proposals.

5.4 People Implications

There are no significant issues concerning people raised by these proposals.

5.5 Property Implications

There are no significant property issues raised by these proposals.

5.6 Consultation

We have consulted with SHARE Museums East ChangeMakers network, the head of which was the Convenor of the Museums Association's Ethics Committee and was instrumental in developing new guidelines on the ethical disposal of collections. It was agreed rationalisation is a fundamental aspect of good collections care and management, which would hugely benefit the Social History collection at Southend Museums Service.

After discussions with the then Director of Museums for Arts Council England, it was agreed, the importance and value of responsible disposal is vital in improving museum storage, care and interpretation of collections. To care for relevant and important collections, it is imperative we re-home, sell or dispose of any damaged or irrelevant objects that do not fit within our collections development policy.

We have also consulted with the Social History Curators Group network who agreed that rationalisation of large social history collections benefits museums by ensuring current collections are sufficiently accessible, and for the future of social history collecting where relevant.

5.7 Equalities Impact Assessment

There are no significant equalities issues raised by these proposals.

5.8 Risk Assessment

The main risk is that if we were not to deal with this large collection, the logistics of inevitably having to deal with it in the future, perhaps in a hurry, could seriously affect our capacity to deliver any future content within the service in a controlled way.

On a minor level there are handling risks associated with carrying many large and heavy objects. Staff are aware of these dangers and care is taken to avoid injury.

5.9 Value for Money

Storage is expensive, even if the costs are subsumed in normal revenue expenditure. The potential of paying for external storage in future, for objects that we may want to take in, would be unnecessary if we can clear space in our current stores. Objects that could not be stored due to lack of space would require funding for external storage, if their need for the collections was great enough. This could be negated if this rationalisation project is undertaken.

5.10 Community Safety Implications

There are no significant safety issues raised by these proposals.

5.11 Environmental Impact

There is a small environmental impact if a number of varied objects are disposed of. This can be reduced by taking the trouble to explore other avenues of disposal (gift, transfer, sale) before physically discarding items. The environmental impact can also be reduced by following council procedures for the disposal of, for example, cathode ray tubes and electronic waste.

6. Background papers

The Following papers were consulted:

SBC Corporate Plan and Annual Report 2015

SBC Corporate Priorities 2016-2017

Southend Museums Service Collections Development Policy 2014 - 2019

Museums Association Code of Ethics

Museums Association Disposals Toolkit

Collections Trust, Collections Management: A guide to selecting a review methodology for collections rationalisation.

Appendix

Appendix 1 - Images of objects for disposal