

Swindon's Art and Museum collections and cultural provision

Cabinet

Date: 20th March 2019

Author: Cabinet Member for the Town Centre

Wards: All

Parishes Affected: All

1. Purpose and Reasons

- 1.1 Swindon has both a rich heritage and an established arts and cultural offer. This offer is diverse, and is currently provided at a number of locations, some with limited visibility. Some of the facilities housing historic or cultural items and activities are difficult to access and in need of investment, meaning that the time is now right to consider a co-ordinated and cohesive strategy for how heritage, arts and culture are accessed in the future.
- 1.2 The most immediate priority is the Swindon Museum and Art Gallery (Swindon MAG). The Council owns and operates Swindon MAG, which houses an outstanding modern art collection of national importance, alongside largely locally-sourced artefacts of historic significance. The collections deserve greater visibility, bringing cultural and educational benefits to a wider audience. Officers have worked hard to assess options to achieve this outcome.
- 1.3 Moreover, in line with the adopted Town Centre Masterplan, great potential exists for the development of a wider cultural quarter and civic offer focussed around the Wyvern\Old Town Hall\Regent's Circus area. This report recommends that work is undertaken towards scoping a comprehensive cultural quarter providing a permanent solution. This will also give the best opportunity to display the collection and ensure the long term sustainability of Swindon MAG.
- 1.4 In the meantime, the Council will ensure that every opportunity is taken to showcase its collections, including improving accessibility to its artworks and artefacts in different locations. Also, following the motion at Full Council on 24th January which agreed to *"ask the Leader of the Council (to) present a report to Cabinet considering the options of how the Council can organise Swindon's own trail with sculptures decorated by local artists and use it to raise money for the GWH Brighter Futures appeal"*, it is proposed that a Member Working Group be established to determine how this project could be taken forward, unlocking opportunities for private sector sponsorship.

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2. Recommendations

Cabinet is recommended to:

- 2.1 Approve the production of a viable and deliverable masterplan for a rebuild of the Wyvern Theatre that includes (but is not limited to) a theatre, a new civic focus and a replacement Swindon Museum and Art Gallery, as a cultural quarter for Swindon, informed and supported by a masterplanning exercise to be funded through a Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SWLEP) grant of £250,000.
- 2.2 Endorse the principle that appropriate items from Swindon's art and museum collection should be displayed at 'pop up' or rotating exhibitions within heritage and civic buildings around the town and, subject to relevant safeguards being in place, be made available for local business display.
- 2.3 Approve a one off budget of up to £100,000 to support the use of space for this wider display of existing art and museum artefacts.
- 2.4 Approve a budget of up to £400,000 to undertake essential improvements at the Swindon MAG at Apsley House.
- 2.5 Approve a new Council pledge that "Every Child will be encouraged to visit the Council's museums including the Swindon Museum and Art Gallery as a learning opportunity while they are at school".
- 2.6 Endorse the Council's role as a facilitator to support accessible art and culture including short term sculpture trails, which promote local talent, and may be auctioned for charitable causes.

3. Detail

Swindon Museum and Art Gallery

- 3.1 This section details the work undertaken towards finding a preferred option for the Museum and Art Gallery (MAG); outlines costings around that development and fit out; and details funding requirements.
- 3.2 Swindon MAG is currently located at Apsley House on the corner of Bath Road and Victoria Hill in Old Town. The premises provides for several small rooms in which artefacts are displayed on a themed basis alongside a gallery in which the art collections are rotated. A store exists within the building for artwork that is not on display. Museum artefacts that are not housed at Swindon MAG are stored at one of two off-site locations.

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3.3 Apsley House constrains Swindon MAG in fulfilling its potential. The building has:

- Seven split levels throughout
- Limited accessibility to some of the rooms
- A rigid and compartmentalised internal structure which lacks flexibility
- Limited capacity for improvements to be made to displays or interpretation
- No active frontage
- Poor signage
- Very little physical capacity for commercial opportunities
- High maintenance costs, and
- Poor working conditions for staff.

3.4 Although a much loved local facility, the visitor experience at Swindon MAG falls well short of what would be expected from a modern museum. Swindon MAG's potential for reaching a wider audience and providing the environment that the artwork in particular commands, is limited. Space is at a premium and school visits are not easy to accommodate. Whilst measures are being put in place to assist the Council's other historic venues (Lydiard and STEAM) in reducing operational costs, without investment the potential for income generation at Swindon MAG's current location is limited. In the last year Swindon MAG attracted only 14,000 visitors compared to around 90,000 at STEAM, despite operating at a cost to the Council of £200,000 per annum. The subsidy per visitor is therefore approximately £14 per person, and this is not sustainable given our current financial challenges. Average daily visitor numbers are around 55 on the days when the museum is open, with only one exhibition in the last four years seeing daily visitor numbers exceed 70.

3.5 Over the last six months, the Council has undertaken an appraisal of potential alternative locations for Swindon MAG. This work has assessed criteria such as location, ease of conversion, ownership, costs, the potential for expansion \ income generation and deliverability.

Stage 1 Options Appraisal

3.6 The Stage 1 Options Appraisal assessed 17 alternative locations for Swindon MAG. The work included an invitation to stakeholders and residents to submit options for assessment, and all options put forward were evaluated.

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- 3.7 A number of options were popular with stakeholders, but have had to be discounted from further assessment as a permanent home for Swindon MAG. Of these, the Carriage Works was discounted due to excessive insurance requirements and fit out costs, and concerns about the level of visitor numbers to justify an estimated spend of £11.1m. The Mechanics Institute would also be too costly to renovate, and is not in the Council's ownership. Options involving town centre retail space are also owned by third parties. This ownership challenge, even on a 20+ year lease would not provide the ongoing certainty required for the investment that the Council would have to make. It is, therefore, not appropriate to proceed with these sites as a permanent home. The museum staff and the Cabinet member are keen to think creatively and it is proposed that further investigations take place on the possibility of developing a hybrid approach, where 'pop up' exhibitions and displays of the art and museum artefacts could take place.

Stage 2 Options Appraisal

- 3.8 The appraisal work informed a shortlist of five options that were taken forward for further consideration at Stage 2. A 'do nothing option' was discounted on the basis that it would lead to the steady decline of Swindon MAG, and potentially its eventual closure. Likewise an option of constructing a dedicated standalone Museum and Art Gallery envisaged through the recent Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) bid was discounted as it is not viable. The five options considered in more detail were:

- Option 1 – Conversion of part of the former Town Hall for the Museum and Art Gallery
- Option 2 – Conversion of Wyvern House (otherwise known as Clarence House) for the Museum and Art Gallery
- Option 3 – Conversion of part of the first floor of the Civic Offices for the Museum and Art Gallery
- Option 4 – Split facility with museum in Old Town Hall and Art in the Civic Offices
- Option 5 – Improvements to the existing facility at Apsley House

- 3.9 These options focus provision into a facility that is:

- in Council control
- close to other cultural facilities

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- able to be converted and operated at comparatively low cost
- potentially available
- would not conflict with other potential uses or income streams, and
- accessible.

3.10 Work was then undertaken to understand opportunities and barriers around these options, including design development and an assessment of costs, which are summarised below.

Option 1 – Conversion of part of the former Town Hall for the Museum and Art Gallery

- Significant benefits around co-location with the library, potential for shared resources and the use of an important heritage location, which is owned by the Council.
- Conversion cost estimated at £1,471,000.
- Tenants on long term leases make this option unachievable.

Option 2 – Conversion of Wyvern House (otherwise known as Clarence House) for the Museum and Art Gallery

- This option would make use of Wyvern House (also known as Clarence House), which forms eastern side of Wyvern Square and is owned by the Council.
- Significant benefits around close proximity to the library and theatre.
- Conversion costs estimated at £1,604,000.
- Existing leases define the parts of the building that would be available for Swindon MAG.

Option 3 – Conversion of part of the first floor of the Civic Offices for the Museum and Art Gallery

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- Much of the Civic Office building is now vacant with the consolidation of staff to other buildings.
- Owned by the Council with a staffed reception.
- This option focusses on the use of upper floors of the Civic Offices including possible internal reconfigurations and accessibility improvements.
- Conversion costs are estimated to be around £1,864,000.

Option 4 - Split facility with museum in Old Town Hall and Art in the Civic Offices

- Option 4 would be to separate the museum and art gallery elements, onto two sites.
- Sufficient space is likely to be available at the sites for the split option, and both buildings are accessible.
- Together the costs for this option are £1,768,000.

Option 5 – Improvements to the existing facility at Apsley House

- 3.11 Without improvement, the existing Swindon MAG facility in Old Town is not well suited to the modern display of museum artefacts or art. The building is also physically constrained which is diminishing its potential to enable access to the collections, and to develop income streams. It is estimated that the facility requires a modest level of investment to deliver the improvements that are needed to bring it up to an appropriate standard, and also enable essential repairs to be undertaken as they arise. With investment, the existing Swindon MAG has the potential to improve the visitor experience, but only once on-site storage and access solutions are resolved.
- 3.12 In this option, the facility at Apsley House would remain, with improved storage space. With investment, the Swindon MAG could become more accessible to all, could benefit from income streams associated with the hire of the Gallery space, and could diversify/expand the activities that take place there. To build on this potential, it is anticipated that capital works would need to be undertaken. These works should be limited to those that are essential for the continued, and improved, operation of the facility and are likely to include enhanced accessibility, updated security and other building works.

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- 3.13 The level of investment and subsidy required to support this investment is anticipated to be substantially lower than the other evaluated options, and would provide an improved Swindon MAG facility until any wider redevelopment takes place. Initial indications are that these works will amount to no more than £400,000. As Apsley House is a listed structure with a complex internal layout these works will require careful consideration. The next step is to take initial cost estimates and firm up detailed feasibility and costings for a programme of work to the facility. This solution also defers the issue of what to do with Apsley House if it was no longer used as the MAG, its listed status meaning that it is more challenging to put it to an alternative use.

Additional considerations

A wider redevelopment opportunity

- 3.14 The area around, and including, the Wyvern Theatre is tired and in need of investment. The latest condition survey for the Wyvern Theatre provides evidence that the building will likely reach its end of life by 2026/27. Significant maintenance, accessibility and improvement works would be required to enable the Wyvern to continue as a functioning theatre. The HLF bid focused on construction of a new dedicated Museum and Art Gallery, and did not consider the future of the Wyvern.
- 3.15 The Town Centre Masterplan identifies the area incorporating Regent Circus, the Old Town Hall and Library, Wyvern Square, the Wyvern Theatre and associated car parks as having the potential to develop a wider Cultural offer. In addition to the theatre, a number of buildings in this area are becoming tired, and have a limited lifespan. The old Wyvern multi-storey Car Park has also been demolished.
- 3.16 In a report to Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SWLEP), Swindon Borough Council has re-stated its commitment to identifying, and working to develop, a scheme which will address the issue of housing its art collection, within the context of developing a wider cultural offer in Swindon town centre. SWLEP funding of £250,000 has been therefore been made available and the Council, working with partners, will use the funding to develop a detailed masterplan for this area, focussing on consolidating the cultural, civic and community offer as a redeveloped Cultural Quarter. The masterplan will include the relevant financial and viability assessments needed to support a delivery strategy for the Cultural Quarter, which is likely to require, and include, some enabling development. The sale and/or redevelopment of the civic offices will comprise part of the viability requirement to contribute to the cost of the new Cultural Quarter. The outcome is intended to include a replacement Wyvern Theatre with an increased capacity to enable Swindon to attract performances for which it currently has no suitably sized venue, and sufficient provision for a

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permanent solution for both civic functions and a new MAG. A replacement theatre will also allow the Council to review the current levels of subsidy and rent associated with the existing facility.

- 3.17 The HLF bid assumed a total project cost of £22m for a stand-alone new MAG facility that was three times larger than today's Swindon MAG. The cost of a smaller museum and art gallery representing an increase in available space as part of a wider development scheme would be substantially lower.
- 3.18 It is anticipated that as this work progresses to a more granular level of detail, working \ advisory groups should be established to ensure that the needs of potential users of the new facilities are taken into account, and that there is appropriate Member involvement.

Pop Up exhibitions – 'Art on Tour'

- 3.19 The key to increasing accessibility to the collections and freeing space at Apsley House may be to develop one or more satellite facilities in or around the town centre to house art or artefacts 'on tour'. It is anticipated that these facilities would be in Council owned buildings that are already staffed, and where access is controlled by a reception. Of these, space could be made available now at low cost in the Civic Offices and STEAM for permanent, but rotating art displays. If the existing facility at Apsley House is to be improved, then rotating or 'pop up' exhibitions must be viewed as a crucial supporting part of that option. The cost of this provision will amount to no more than £100,000, and work remains ongoing to determine the precise figure. It is anticipated that the first of these exhibitions could be curated and in place by the end of the summer.
- 3.20 In addition to increasing visibility and exposure to our collections, there is clearly a need to provide a more commercial ethos to the Swindon MAG. By taking stored art from Apsley House the space for hire would be increased which will ensure that Swindon MAG is in a better position to capitalise on its position as a learning resource for schools.
- 3.21 Another aspect of 'art on tour' is the potential for Swindon to develop and showcase short term installations or sculpture trails in public areas, such as the Elephant Parade in London, the 'SuperLambBanana' in Liverpool and the Wallace and Gromit trail in Bristol. These installations typically involve local artists decorating identikit cast pieces which are then displayed in prominent locations for a period of time before being auctioned with profits going to charitable causes.
- 3.22 The benefits of such an installation are significant, creating interest around the Borough and providing an educational and leisure resource. Typically, art

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installations are funded through private sponsorship. The Council does not have a budget for this type of activity but is keen to provide support through facilitation, by providing relevant advice and assistance for funding bids, and by co-ordinating the regulatory elements of the installation through its Event Safety Advisory Group (ESAG) to ensure that its responsibilities are discharged in a consistent and expeditious manner.

- 3.23 To take this project forward, a Member Working Group is proposed to be established, which will seek to investigate options for the management and funding of such an initiative.

Maximising our Education experience

- 3.24 The STEAM museum operates a successful and intensive education programme with no financial burden on the Council's base budget. This resource has built up over a long period of time and is able to adapt to changes in emphasis in the National Curriculum. It is proposed that STEAM and Swindon MAG work more closely together, including sharing resources and expertise in both this area, and in developing events and publicity.
- 3.25 It is accordingly proposed that an additional pledge is adopted with the objective of maximising the use of our museums as a learning resource.
- 3.26 Another area to be explored, which would improve accessibility to work from the collection and develop a modest income stream would be to hire works to interested businesses, subject to appropriate criteria being in place to cover their display.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 The Council could decide not to progress improvements to the cultural and heritage offer in Swindon, and not to invest in the art and museum collections at Swindon MAG. By failing to consider a context for the longer term sustainability of Swindon's cultural offer, the Council would run the risk of being unable to provide the leisure and learning environment that contributes not only to social development, but also vibrancy, realm and a sense of place. Without a properly planned and costed strategy for a cultural and civic focus, we will find ourselves in a much weaker position when the Wyvern Theatre and Wyvern House (Clarence House) need to be replaced.
- 4.2 The current operating model for Swindon MAG is unviable. Without investment, the current facility at Apsley House has little scope for generating income and without income is unsustainable. A number of options for relocation have been

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assessed against a range of criteria, and costed for conversion of certain town centre buildings. This work has assessed the potential for Swindon MAG to relocate in its entirety, to relocate to split sites, to stay where it is, and to develop a more visible presence with satellite exhibitions.

5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

Financial and Procurement Implications

SWLEP funding of £250,000 is available and would be used to develop a viable and deliverable masterplan for a cultural and civic quarter for Swindon.

Investment in delivering 'art on tour', and in essential improvements to the existing SMAG is based on relevant costings, is expected to amount up to a maximum of £500,000 in total.

Legal and Human Rights Implications

All legal and human rights considerations have been taken into account in preparing this report and it is considered that the proposals within this report are compatible with Convention Rights.

All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

The recommendations in this report support the long term redevelopment of a key part of Swindon's Town Centre and are intended to provide a focus for an enhanced and up to date cultural and civic offer. A new Swindon MAG will be a key part of this, ensuring its long term sustainability.

It is not anticipated that the recommendations in this report would have any significant impact on staff, health, rural issues or crime and disorder.

Diversity Impact Assessment (DIA)

Diversity issues have been considered in the options work that has informed this report. A DIA is available on request to support the recommendations of this Report.

Risk Management

By planning for future cultural development, and enabling improvements to the fabric, visibility and commercial potential of Swindon MAG, the Council is ensuring social and physical infrastructure is delivered in a manner that is affordable to the public purse.

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The Council's Town Centre and Project Delivery Governance Framework ensures that all risks are appropriately managed through the delivery process in line with Council objectives.

6. Consultees

- 6.1 The adopted Town Centre Masterplan identifies the potential for the area around the Wyvern Theatre, library and Regent's Circus to develop as a cultural quarter. The Town Centre Masterplan was subject to wide ranging public consultation, and adoption by the Planning Committee.
- 6.2 The Options Appraisal to inform potential new homes for Swindon MAG invited stakeholders to submit ideas and proposals for new locations, which were then evaluated. Both the Swindon MAG Trust and the Friends of Swindon MAG were involved in this exercise.
- 6.3 Internally, the Board Director, Resources (Section 151 Officer) and Director of Law and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

7. Background Papers

SWINDON MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY - OPTIONS APPRAISAL REPORT
Options Appraisal, (October 2018).

SWINDON MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY - 5 RELOCATION OPTIONS
APPRAISAL REPORT Subsequent option evaluation and costing, (January 2019).

8. Appendices

None.

9. Key Decision/Decision in Cabinet Work Programme and Forward Plan

- 9.1 This is a key decision, and is included on the Forward Plan.