

Report of the Director of Community Services

Executive Board Member Decision Meeting for Regeneration & Leisure

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CARMARTHEN TOWN MUSUEM

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This paper considers options for Carmarthen Town Museum following failings highlighted in the 2016 Visit Wales VAQAS assessment and the requirement to submit the museum service's Museum Accreditation return by June 2017.

Background

Carmarthen Town Museum is on the lower ground floor of Carmarthen Library, in a partitioned area within a function room. When the function room is in use, people cannot visit the museum.

It tells the story of Carmarthen through items from the Carmarthenshire County Collection. It achieved accredited status in 2013 and has the option to reapply in 2017. The museum is unstaffed and relies on the partnership with the library. It has been closed to visitors since October 2016 over concerns relating to public safety.

Carmarthen Town Museum has previously achieved Accreditation as part of a larger, umbrella service. On its own it cannot meet the basic requirements. It is essentially a temporary display because it does not hold long-term collections of artefacts. Venues for temporary exhibitions are not eligible for Accredited status. The umbrella service under which Carmarthen Town Museum can apply for Accreditation is Carmarthenshire Museum Service.

Museum Accreditation

Museum Accreditation is a UK-wide scheme which sets standards for museum management, collections care and public service. In Wales the scheme is managed by the Museums Archives and Libraries Division of Welsh Government in partnership with Arts Council England. The scheme is voluntary and achieved by taking part in a monitoring process to establish that the museum is meeting the necessary standards.

Key challenges facing Carmarthen Town Museum

1. The museum service is operating too many sites with too few resources. Carmarthen Town Museum failed the Visit Wales Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS) assessment in 2016. This measures the suitability of a venue as a 'tourist attraction'. Failure to achieve VAQAS indicates that the museum does not meet the definition of a 'visitor attraction'.
2. Although VAQAS and Museum Accreditation are not linked, VAQAS assessments are commissioned through MALD, the division of Welsh Government that oversees Museum Accreditation. It could be questioned why Carmarthen Town Museum was ever Accredited but in the context of the serious deterioration that has occurred since 2013, it is unlikely that it will achieve Accredited Museum status again in its present form.
3. Growing pressure on available space within Carmarthen Library has led to a reduction in the size of the museum. It is now very limited in content. VAQAS recommends the display should engage a visitor for at least an hour. The current exhibition has content to occupy a visitor for approximately 10 minutes.
4. Pressure on space within the library has resulted in the museum being used as a library store and it is regularly screened off and closed to visitors. This is illustrated in the June 2016 VAQAS report:

"The museum is located down some stairs, in a very small area off of a disused room. At the time of my visit, the entrance was screened off, and the area was screened off, and it was full of stacked chairs and an old typewriter. Although the staff member who had to show me to the museum did offer to move the chairs, it did not create a good first impression."

Photographs taken in October 2016 illustrate the situation



Carmarthen Town Museum

It has been appropriated by the library service as a store. Boxes piled high make it inaccessible and unsafe for visitors.



Entrance to Carmarthen Town Museum

Since this visit in October 2016, the museum is advertised as temporarily closed due to concerns over visitor safety.

5. The museum is signposted outside the building but internal signs to the museum have been removed and visitors have to ask for assistance to find it.

“It is housed in the town's library, and there is a large sign outside the building, indicating the presence of the museum. However once inside the building it was not clear to me where the actual museum is located and I had to seek the assistance of library staff.” Carmarthen Town Museum VAQAS Report, June 2016

Recommendations

Maintain the status quo and apply for Museum Accreditation anyway.

- The museum is not currently operational.
- When open, its location within the library function room frequently meant it was inaccessible.
- There are no dedicated staff and no resources to improve displays or public engagement.
- Carmarthen Town Museum is unable to meet the basic Accreditation standards relating to 'organisational health', 'collections', and 'users and their experiences'.

Remove Carmarthen Town Museum from the Museum Accreditation scheme and integrate relevant collections within the new archive/library development.

- The timing of this option coincides well with the development of the new archive/library facility.
- A transition from the current scenario with an isolated display in the basement can be replaced fairly seamlessly with an integrated display woven throughout the library.
- This can be achieved with little expense if current materials are re-used; or a higher specification can be achieved to tie in with the overall appearance of the archive development.
- Some (although not all) collections will remain accessible to visitors.
- This approach should improve the public image of museums, archives, libraries.
- Collections will be better managed within available resources.

Remove Carmarthen Town Museum from the Museum Accreditation scheme and place collections in storage until a future use is identified.

- The trial closure of Carmarthen Town Museum since October has not led to any complaint or customer feedback; it appears to have gone unnoticed.
- The timing of this option in terms of pressure on museum stores is particularly critical. Already identified as over-crowded, museum stores are under increasing pressure to accommodate collections from other buildings that are being leased to third parties. This is placing collections at risk from damage and loss.
- A commercial secure storage solution will be a short-term option to consider until a long-term solution is achieved.