

Maidstone Museum Capital Expenditure Update

Final Decision-Maker	Economic Regeneration and Leisure Committee
Lead Head of Service	Head of Regeneration & Economic Development
Lead Officer and Report Author	Museums Director
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

This report updates Members on the options for capital expenditure in the Museum and confirms that the preferred option is to improve a gallery space which is supported by the Maidstone Museum Foundation and Kent Archaeological Society. However more work is needed to create proposals which reflect Member ambitions for a dynamic and changing museum providing high quality experiences for visitors and drive-up visitor numbers.

Purpose of Report

Discussion

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

That the report be noted.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
ERL Committee	16 November 2021

Maidstone Museum Capital Expenditure Update

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	<p>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place • We do not expect the recommendations will by themselves materially affect achievement of corporate priorities. 	Museum Director
Cross Cutting Objectives	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected <p>The report supports the achievement(s) of the Heritage is Respected cross cutting objectives by ensuring an efficient and well-run museum.</p>	Museum Director
Risk Management	The report is for noting	Museum Director
Financial	The proposals set out in the recommendation are all within already approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation.	Senior Finance Manager
Staffing	We will deliver the recommendations with our current staffing.	Head of Regeneration and Economic Development
Legal	This report is for noting only and therefore contains no legal implications.	Team Leader, Contracts and

		Commissioning, Mid Kent Legal Services
Privacy and Data Protection	The report is for noting only and will create no new data	Policy and Information Team
Equalities	The recommendations do not propose a change in service therefore will not require an equalities impact assessment	Equalities and Communities Officer
Public Health	We recognise that the recommendations will not negatively impact on population health or that of individuals.	Public Health Officer
Crime and Disorder	The report will have no impact on Crime and Disorder	Crime and Disorder Manager
Procurement	This report is for noting only	Head of Service & Section 151 Officer
Biodiversity and Climate Change	Any refurbishments will consider energy efficient lighting and insulation measures in keeping with MBC's commitment to reduce energy and carbon emissions	Biodiversity and Climate Change Officer

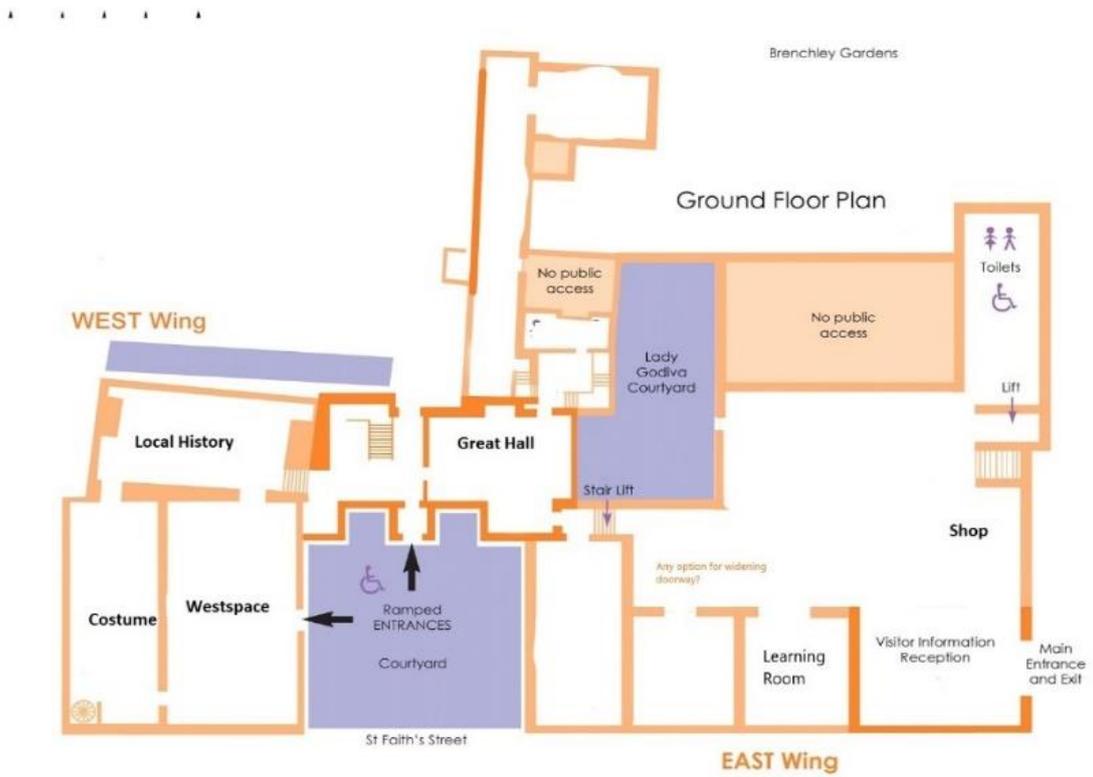
2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

2.1 In April 2021 ERL Committee considered a report setting out 4 options for the use of the existing capital allocation of £389,000 set out in the Council's capital programme. These four options were:

- Option1: Conversion of Westspace (the former café) into a temporary exhibition gallery
- Option 2: Conversion of Westspace a room for income generating events and external hire
- Option 3: The refurbishment of a display gallery
- Option 4: Minimal refurbishment of Westspace as an events and hire space and development of a new public gallery

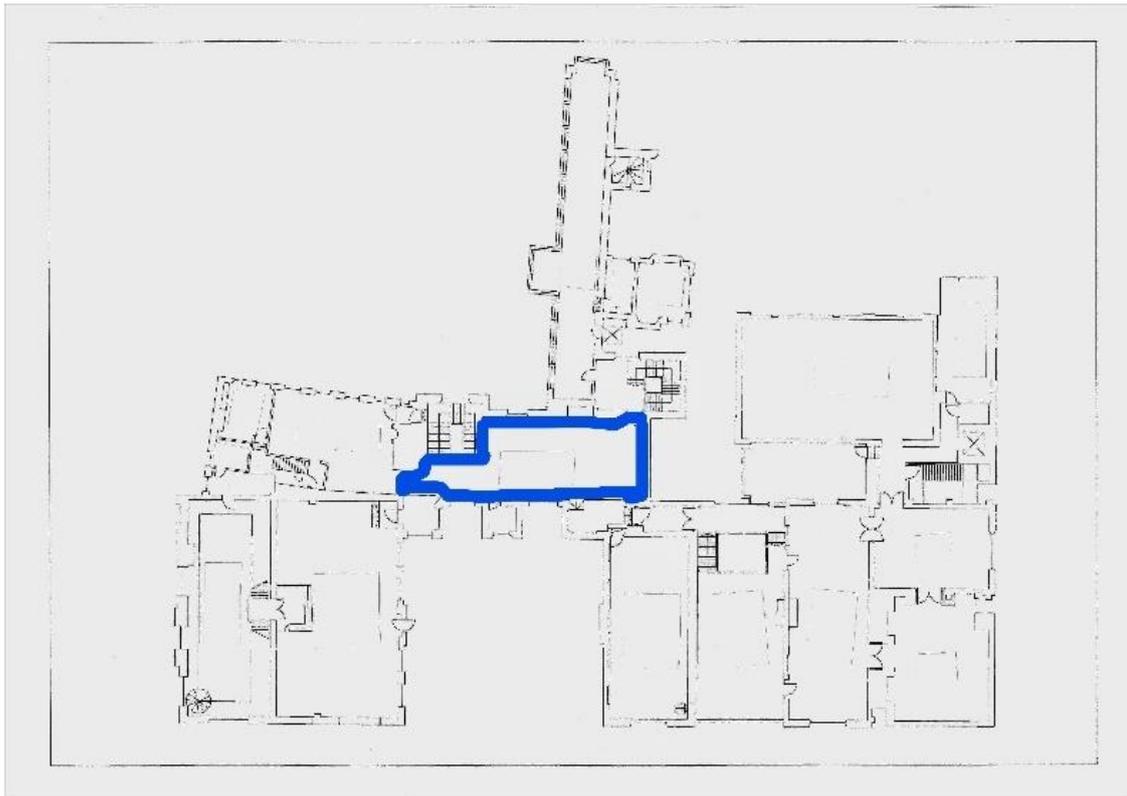
2.2 The pros and cons for each of these options were set out in the report and can be reviewed in Appendix 1 together with further information on costs.

2.3 For east of reference the Westspace is the former site of the museum café as shown here on the museum plan.



2.4 Option 3 concerns the Withdrawing Room which currently houses the British Archaeology displays. The area is marked below in blue.





Museum 1st Floor

- 2.5 Of the four options outlined, option 3, the refurbishment of a display gallery, was recommended. It was proposed that the British Archaeological Gallery be renewed in partnership with the Kent Archaeological Society, who own many of the display pieces at the Museum. It was explained that this would deliver against the museum's 20-year plan, telling the story of Maidstone, and would aim to engage community groups in the construction and design of the gallery. However, ERL Members asked that further consultation be undertaken with the Maidstone Museum Foundation and Kent Archaeological Society before making a final decision.

3 Progress update

- 3.1 A letter of support for option 3 has been received from the Maidstone Museum Foundation and is promised by Kent Archaeological Society at the time of publication.
- 3.2 Option 1: It is clearer now that large scale, blockbuster exhibitions are increasingly beyond the financial reach of civic museums and the importance placed on sharing more of our own collections has led to a recognition that the current temporary exhibition galleries are the best place for such shows, already having in place the correct environment and lighting etc.
- 3.3 Option 2: The use of Westspace as a large-scale event space was predicated on redirecting audiences as a result of the then proposed changes to the operations of The Hazlitt Theatre and of the Adult Education Centre. The museum has the necessary space to offer a home to various groups and clubs based at the Hazlitt if that venue were not available. Equally, there are a number of courses and activities provided by the Adult Education

Service that would be equally popular with museum audiences. As far as officers are aware the Adult Education Service is to remain open and so the gap in services this option would have allowed the museum to fill, is no longer likely.

- 3.4 Option 3: There has been an offer by the William and Edith Oldham Charitable Trust (hereafter the Oldham Trust) of up to £100,000 on the condition that the money is spent on the refurbishment of the Archaeology Gallery and that match funding is found by the Maidstone Museums Foundation. This generous offer and opens up several avenues of opportunity for officers which they will need to consider very carefully and in consultation with the two Trusts, should the Committee finally agree that this is best use of the Museum's capital. The entire sum, including money raised and matched by the Oldham Trust, could be used to create an even higher standard of archaeology gallery but it may also be wise to retain part of the original capital funding in order to create seed funding for future spaces/parts of the story we have to tell.
- 3.5 Kent Archaeological Society have been, unsurprisingly, supportive of the option to refurbish the current archaeology gallery. A large part of the Society's collection is stored at the museum and they would welcome the chance to display more. The specialist period knowledge and expertise of the Society would be a valuable addition to the professional skills of the museum resulting in a popular but rigorous exploration of our early history.
- 3.6 Option 4: Carrying out a small refurbishment of both the Westspace (by removing the catering area and re-decorating) and a gallery with new labelling and information but without a full redisplay has generally been received with the opinion that it achieves neither one thing nor the other and is unsatisfactory.

4 Further Considerations

- 4.1 Members have challenged the museum to be more ambitious and introduce digital media in its work and to consider the future governance of both the museum and its associated Trusts. These considerations also need to be viewed in the context of the '20 Year Plan' and how the vision agreed previously can be achieved without the availability of a large capital grant. To give Members confidence that the gallery investment meets their ambitions further work and consultation with Members will be organised including a visit to Brighton Museum, which has recently and successfully invested in gallery spaces and other Museum's where appropriate.
- 4.2 **Ambition**
Members have made clear their desire to see ideas for a vibrant and ambitious museum with particular reference to a positive attitude to change, making accessible more of the museum's collections through, regularly changing displays. Officers are keen to work with members to define and fully understand that ambition and what it looks like in terms of service delivery. Some work will begin immediately and continue during the museum's winter closure, with previously un-displayed objects installed in

several areas of the museum, such as the Withdrawing Room, to create a changing experience for visitors even before the initiation of the final capital project agreed by members.

4.3 Digital Media

The increasing use of digital media in museums, as elsewhere, provides many exciting opportunities for how we tell the stories of our artefacts and the history of the borough. In addition to those areas staff have already entered digitally, such as remote teaching for schools, websites, social media and both video and digital gaming in the Ancient Lives gallery, opportunities for visitors to personalise and share their own experiences open up a whole new area of engagement. Virtual and Augmented reality offer new ways of seeing and experiencing the past. Officers will need to carry out more research on the most useful and cost-effective options for the museum. While staff do have experience in this area, it may be that more specialist advice is required. A visit to Brighton Museum will be organised for ERL Members and Officers to see what a new gallery can achieve.

4.4 Achieving the 20-year Vision

It is clear that large funders are unlikely to provide one large capital grant to carry out all the work envisaged in the Transformation Plan submitted to National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2019, but there are emerging new opportunities for support on a more local level. In all likelihood, the only practical option will be to carry out refurbishment and improvement on a step-by-step basis as funding opportunities became available. However, in order to do this in a structured way, officers will need to revisit previous plans to ensure that an overall plan allows for this sectional completion without losing the essence of the original vision and the interdependencies that each story has while acknowledging that major capital elements may have to be refined. The goal must be that visitors will be able to make sense of their journey around the museum during the period of transformation and won't have to experience each area in a piecemeal way.

4.5 Governance

4.6 Achieving the 20 year vision is complicated by the number of Trusts with collections in the Museum, and in the case of the Bently Wing Trust, their control over certain spaces and galleries. These spaces are marked in red below; on the Ground Floor, the Bently Library and on the First Floor, the two Temporary Exhibition rooms, the Art Gallery and landing. This gives them a right to approve or veto what takes place in these rooms.

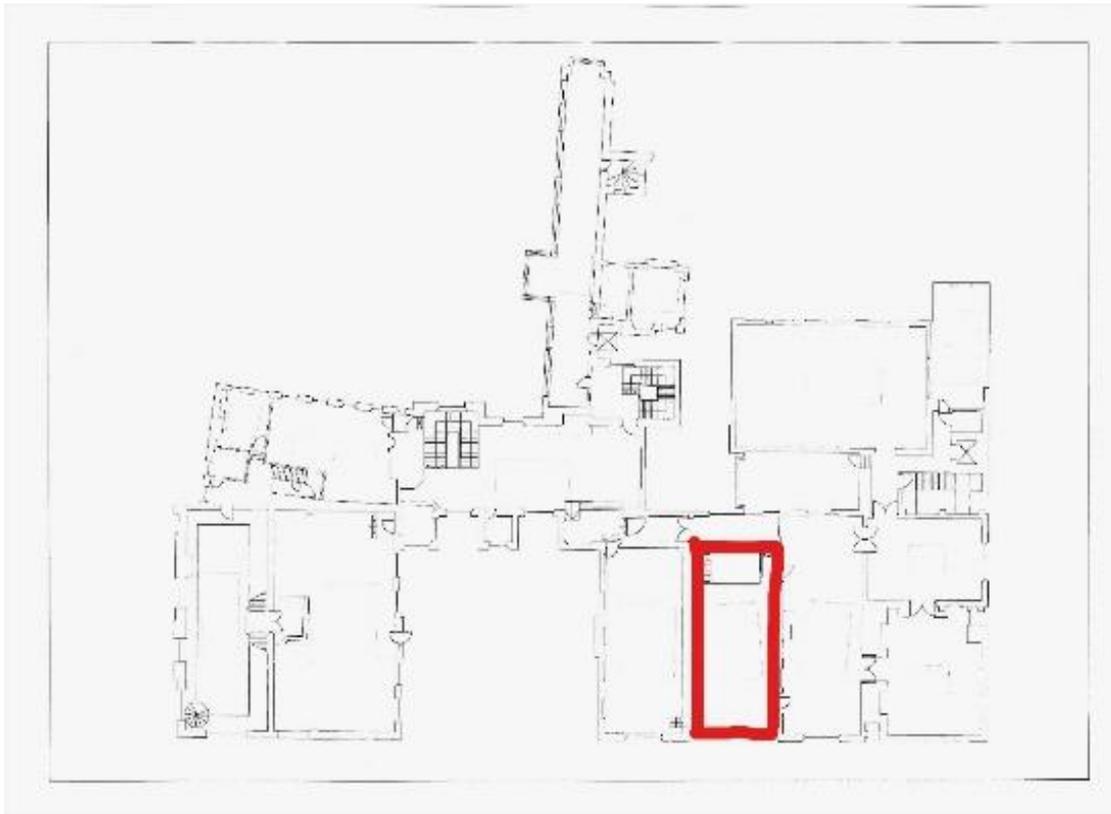


Fig 1: The Bentlif Library



Fig 2: The Temporary Exhibition and Art Galleries

- 4.7 During the planning of the Transformation project which went to National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2019, The Bentlif Trust were involved in discussions at various stages of planning. At that time, Trustees felt unable to commit support for the project because in its current form it required permission to change the use of those spaces controlled by the Trust. Alternative offers put forward by officers to ensure a continuing Bentlif presence did not allay trustee concerns and no final decision was taken to accept or reject the museum's proposals. The Board have not met since.

- 4.8 There are three Trusts, besides MMF and Kent Archaeological Society, who are associated with the museum and the impact on, and of, these must be considered. See Appendix 2 for description of each Trust's role and current status
- 4.9 The issue of the museum's governance and relationship to the wider Borough Council has been raised by members, and officers will be revisiting the work carried out in 2016-18 on this subject. Whatever the outcome of that piece of work, it is the view of officers that the proposed capital expenditure remains appropriate as investment in galleries and collections and people is necessary for the continued success of the museum whether in the direct control of the Local Authority or under an arms-length agreement with a charitable trust or some other arrangement. Officers would welcome ERL Committee's view on this.
- 4.10 Further discussions will be needed with the Bentrif Wing Trust in any event. Without their support the 20 year plan cannot be implemented. It may be necessary to consider a revised plan, which scaled down the amount of major capital intervention in the museum, and respect the spaces controlled by the Bentrif Trust and retain them as they are now.
- 4.11 The current proposal to refurbish the Archaeology displays, has no impact on those areas under the purview of the Bentrif Trust.
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5 CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 5.1 Consultation has taken place with the Maidstone Museum Foundation and Kent Archaeological Society. Letters of support from these bodies can be found at Appendix 3. Previous Committee feedback is also set out in paragraph 2.5
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6 NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 6.1 Officers will return in February 2022 with a more fully detailed proposal for members based on work carried out in the interim to address the considerations in Section 4.
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7 REPORT APPENDICES

- Appendix 1. Previously discussed options
Appendix 2. Details of Associated Trusts
Appendix 3. Letters of support