

Our Ref. Newport Museum
Your Ref.
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13 January 2015

Mr W. Godfrey

Chief Executive Officer
Newport City Council
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Godfrey Road
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Social History Curators
Group (SHCG)
7 The Fairway
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Dear Mr Godfrey

Re: Budget savings proposals: Newport Museum & Art Gallery

I am writing to you on behalf of the Social History Curators Group, an organisation which exists to improve the status and provision of social history in museums and the standards of collections, research, display and interpretation. Our activities focus on providing information, support and training for those working with social history collections across the UK, to promote and encourage people to engage with these collections.

We understand that Newport Council is currently facing pressure to make significant cuts to its budget for 2015/2016, a situation faced by many local authorities across the UK.

However, we are deeply concerned to hear that in order to meet these cuts, Newport Council is considering closing the Museum and Art Gallery and reducing its staff (according to an article in Museums Journal (Dec 2014), this could be as many as 13 FTE). This is worrying for several reasons - the detrimental impact the absence of a museum site could have on public engagement in local history, the loss of staff knowledge which can bring these collections alive for the people of Newport, and uncertainty over the future care of the collections.

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Newport's collections are incredibly significant, not only locally but nationally and internationally too. As one of the oldest museum services in Wales, it contains significant collections of social history, natural history, archaeology and fine art. Of particular significance is the Chartist collection of weapons, engravings and silver from the 1839 Chartist Uprising in Newport; an important collection of early twentieth century banners which were made by the Newport Women's Suffragette Union to campaign for rights for women; and the original archive of designs and construction photographs for the famous Newport Transporter Bridge. This has been reflected in exhibitions and events that the council has, quite rightly, been very proud to be involved with. As Councillor Mike Hamilton said at the time of the opening of the new permanent Chartism display: "The Chartist protest is a significant date in Newport's history and this new exhibition is great for the city." Collections like these make the museum a place that can attract tourists and contribute to the visitor economy, leading to a positive impact on local businesses. Moreover, beyond the headline collections mentioned above are a myriad of smaller individual items collected over the last 125 years and displayed in the museum that have engaged generations of local people in their history, encouraging a sense of pride in the place they live.

Within the museum sector, too, the museum's pioneering work to showcase these important collections has been recognised. Soon after the Chartism display was refreshed in 2010, it was used by the Social History Curators Group as a case study on best practice. Former curator Rachel Lovering shared her experience and knowledge of putting the new permanent Chartism exhibition together by giving a presentation at our annual conference and also through a written paper included in our Journal (Vol. 35), circulated to over 300 members in museums across the UK. Her reflections on the project were particularly useful to other members of our group in similar organisations, facing similar challenges and who were inspired by Newport's ability to produce a high-standard exhibition in an economical way. The museum's recent participation in the 'hidden not heard' project with Mencap Cymru is an excellent example of how the museum is working to engage all sections of the community in its history.

We are aware that in the last few years, Newport Museum Service has already been drastically reduced and we are worried that further cuts to the museum service will cause irrevocable damage. From the Council's press release issued on 15th December 2014, we

understand that the current suggestion is that the collections could be moved from the purpose-built museum and put into storage, pending a potential future move to a smaller building. We appreciate that the council has made assurances that the collection would be stored appropriately and that attempts would be made to make the collections accessible to the public but we firmly believe that without a permanent museum site or sufficient staff (with the requisite skills) to look after and interpret these collections, the council will be at risk of failing in its duty to care for the heritage of Newport.

We are relieved that no final decisions have been made yet and welcome this opportunity for consultation. We hope that this period allows the people of Newport, as well as those further afield, to make their feelings clear about the importance of the museum.

Unfortunately the proposals outlined in the consultation surveys are vague and ill-defined, and do not provide the necessary contextual information to help the people of Newport make informed decisions on the future of the museum. For example, we are keen to know how the savings of £100,000 (year 1) and £300,000 (year 2) have been calculated? How would the work of current staff be conducted in future? For example, previous cuts in the last four to five years have already reduced the number of staff with specialist collections skills and knowledge. Will this be impacted further in the cuts? How exactly would temporary pop-up exhibitions work? Producing temporary exhibitions can be a full-time job and is not without significant costs. We would also be worried that in order to maintain levels of public-facing activity without a museum site, the behind the scenes work which is essential to maintain good collections documentation would be sidelined.

We recognise that the council has some tough decisions to make with regard to cutting services but we do not believe that closing the museum in favour of temporary exhibitions and pop-up displays is a practical way forward. It is short-term thinking that puts the legacy of the heritage of the city at risk. We believe the best way that the collections can continue to inspire the public and be cared for appropriately is by retaining the museum building and the staff who work there.

We welcome the consultation process and hope that open, frank discussions can take place not only with Newport residents but also including the input of related museum bodies, both within Wales and across the United Kingdom. However, this can only be done by making

publically available detailed information on the options currently being considered by the council for the future of the museum. We urge you to make these proposals available as soon as possible, so that a solution can be found that does not risk the long-term future of the city's heritage.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest possible convenience.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michelle L. Lees".

Michelle Lees
SHCG Chair
On behalf of SHCG Trustees