

ENFIELD 229

UNOFFICIAL FRIENDS OF MUSEUM & ARCHIVE SERVICES

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CUTS: 'NOTHING HAS BEEN FINALISED YET'

Councillor Orhan in the Enfield Independent / September 30th.

Suggestions to cut Enfield's Museums and Archives services have created huge concern amongst people and organisations across the Borough, as well as professionals within the national Heritage sector. As Enfield Council's consultation questionnaire drew to a close last week there is still some confusion over exactly what is being proposed and who will make any decision.

The mismatch between the public proposal and information being discovered elsewhere does suggest the whole thing may be an idea intended to test the water. Yet we also understand plans are already in place to delete all the current museum and archive staff posts - an action that will have devastating consequences.

The threat to the museums and archives also seems to have been missed by those ultimately responsible for the decision. Some councillors have acknowledged that they missed these proposals. It seems most likely because they were lost within the context of wider cuts to other services.

Thankfully Councillor Ayfer Orhan, whose cabinet responsibility includes museums and archives, has indicated in the press that 'Nothing has been finalised yet'. So we remain hopefully that they will pull back from the closures, loss of staff and fatal cuts to the services.



Individual and organisation campaigners at a press call for the local paper on the cuts to museums and archives. Thank you to Enfield Advertiser for use of photo.

Update

Since our first newsletter lots of fascinating facts have come to the surface and it is clear there is a big difference between what the public proposal suggests and what is actually on the cards.

One member of the public made inquiries

about the proposed digitising of the Archives service. They were told by a council officer "We have no intention of digitising our entire local studies collection - only those items where it makes sense to do so".

Update contd.

“We have no intention of digitising our entire local studies collection”

Council officer

The Council’s prioritisation for the digitising of local history materials will focus on statutory obligations, items of high value to the local community and items where copyright is not an issue.

They continued ‘Once we have undertaken this exercise, we will estimate the cost in staff time.’

So in fact, they have not as yet costed the resources necessary to digitise the service even though they have proposed to do it. An interesting approach to making financial savings.

We also now understand that the proposal about ‘moving’ the downstairs museum is actually about closing it. By default this also means cutting the main programme of exhibitions. It looks like the ‘Just Married: 150 Years of Enfield Weddings’ exhibition currently on show will be the last exhibition at Enfield museum.

What is most infuriating about this conversation the Council is having about ‘operational arrangements’ is the lack of any mention of the small staff teams

and the cuts to jobs.

In another response to an inquiry the Council’s resident engagement team (responsible for the questionnaire about the cuts) said “The accompanying document was written to provide an overview of the proposals, providing enough information to enable respondents to make an informed judgement.”

Our judgement may have been better informed if there had been reference to the number of staff being cut and less spin had been given to closures and loss of service. If the questionnaire had asked ‘would you prefer an open archive or a partial digital service’ or ‘should we close the downstairs museum and exhibition programme’. Then we might have given better informed answers.

Moreover this shows a professional lack of understanding about how an archive and a museum works. The current staff have decades of local knowledge. That in itself is a resource. To throw it away without mention seriously suggests those making the proposal have no real idea what they are doing.

“The staff with their expert local knowledge are irreplaceable”

Enfield Councillor

Stepping up the action?

No one is in any doubt about the current financial climate but if tough decisions have got to be made then honest and grown-up politicians should have the common sense to be more honest and grown-up with how they interact with the public. Leader of the Council, Councillor Doug Taylor, wrote recently “I can pledge that my administration will look to prepare for better times by investing in areas of long-term benefit”.

We want to make the point that 4.5 posts are currently keeping alive our museums and archives. The long term benefit of these small services is something that our great grandchildren will thank us for. If these things are lost there will be no coming back in five or ten years time.

It is unfortunate that the whole process of consultation has left many people feeling distrustful of those who we elected to represent us. Rather than propose terminal cuts with a few months’ notice it might have been better to try

and engage with users meaningfully at an earlier stage. We hope that the proposals to cut these small services will be withdrawn but if the threat continues we plan to enhance our campaign with more robust action. Our messages and information will aim to change a political decision but will, most likely, also cause embarrassment.

If there is a more positive outcome we propose to put our future energy and efforts into enhancing and improving the services, into even finding alternate sources of support for them. We would then work with the Council and to wholeheartedly support them to make best use of their and our valuable assets.

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We are prompted to ask which officer recommended these cuts? And what advice did they give Councillor Orhan?

It continues to be deeply troubling to discover a number of councillors knew nothing about the original cuts. We have even met a member of the council cabinet who did not even know there was a ground floor museum at the Dugdale centre!

The overall public response we have picked up is dismay. That seems privately reflected amongst councillors who knew nothing of the cuts and threat to two small staff teams. One councillor responded to us mentioning that “The staff with their expert local knowledge are irreplaceable”. We just hope that message goes around and that other councillors say something now. We also want councillors from all sides to work together and save this small part of Enfield’s service. Please save the party politics for another time.



Costs

Our costing of the Museums and Archives service at 56p per citizen a year still stands. It was drawn from figures given to us by the Council. Other figures have been given out which include a substantial additional costs of rent. This knocks the figure up to approximately 95p but we might argue that the rental cost is going to apply whether it is for a museum and archive or if it is for a room full of filing cabinets. Either way it’s less than £1 so the basic point still stands.

This simple concept is aimed at making a point: even if we **measure THE cost above THE value, the two small services are STILL a bargain.** If cutting costs is the **primary goal** then perhaps we should ask what other things cost. What is the annual price of running the Eternal Flame at the Civic Centre? What is the cost of garden maintenance around the Enfield town war memorial? Both are small in the wider scheme of things, yet because we understand their value we resource them even in times of difficulty.

Letters

Amongst the scores of letters and responses to the proposals we have seen was an open letter from the Regional Museum Development Service, sent to various decision makers in Enfield Council. It covers some very important points so we have copied the larger part of it here to read.

We have serious concerns about the proposals regarding Enfield Museum and local studies centre.

We appreciate the current financial climate for all local authorities is an extremely difficult one, requiring very difficult decisions to be made.

Nevertheless we feel that the proposal to effectively 'mothball' the museum on the 1st floor of the Dugdale Centre, and reduce local studies to an appointment-only service, will cause a level of harm to the cultural life of the borough disproportionate to any short-term revenue savings that will be made.

The opening of the new museum in the Dugdale Centre in 2011 has unquestionably been a success, with visitor numbers having risen from 15,784 in 2011-12 to 24,781 in 2014-15. These are very respectable figures for a small local authority service, the value of which is underlined by the fact that on average such museums generate £3 for the local economy for every £1 invested.

The two recent exhibitions on the First World War and Weddings, each on course to bring in a total of 40,000 visitors in just two years, underlines the 'shop window' value of having such an excellent museum in the ground floor space, ensuring solid business for the cafe and bringing in potential custom for other services in the building such as the theatre, art gallery and conference rooms.

Undeniably, the loss of the exhibition space on the ground floor would represent a significant impoverishment of the cultural offer provided at one of the key buildings in the town centre, and the loss of a vibrant and much loved service. One only needs to read the attached extract of comments from the visitor book to realise just how admired the ground floor museum is locally.

In addition to the exhibition programme and the core tasks of managing the collection, staff have provided family holiday activities, adult conferences, participated in Black History Month, Holocaust Memorial Day and the recent borough 50th anniversary celebrations, have maintained displays in local libraries, Forty hall and the Civic centre, taken part in local festivals and have advised a range of community organisations on lottery funding for heritage projects.

One can only imagine how much more could have been achieved if the museum had not lost its senior museum manager

Questionable questionnaire

Professionally speaking we are not sure what the results of the questionnaire can actually give in terms of detailed understanding. The online survey forced users to submit answers to questions before they were allowed to proceed to the next. Such a closed system often presents false feedback. Particularly when the questions are loaded toward a single proposal as is the case here. The personal details section at the end had a 'prefer not to say' box but no such pass was allowed in earlier questions.

We have discussed responses with people who thought 'moving' the museum literally meant what it said and that the display cabinets and exhibition programme from downstairs were being moved rather than closed. Others were positive about digitalisation of archives only to later discover it was partial, uncosted and done at the expense of staff and open access.

Of the four questions on museums two are absolutely meaningless. People are asked if the 'proposal will make a difference to your enjoyment of the museum' but the answers do not indicate a positive or negative difference. The public could respond 100% saying the proposal will make 'a great deal' of difference but that does not help anyone understand if that difference will be negative or positive. Just a difference.

Question 10 suffers the same basic flaw.

And icing on the cake had early surveys with a none-existent return postcode on them, which could result in failed returns. A technical glitch certainly, but a rather unfortunate one for a resident engagement team.

Some people have expressed an opinion that the failings in the consultation have been done deliberately to hide what is really going on. A kinder alternative is that the process has just been rushed and ill prepared. Neither is acceptable.

In conclusion it seems as if the 'any comments' section at the end will provide the only unbiased response but the general rule with questionnaires like this is to summarise these. So we now await the report written by the Consultation and Resident Engagement team and we await to see how that will influence councillors decisions.

If the Council does pursue the cuts through such a flawed process then some campaigners plan to respond further on this issue. Some are already investigating the possibility of a Judicial Review based on the poor consultation process.

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and education officer in the first round of cuts in 2011. The museum is now at the point where it cannot realistically absorb any further cut.

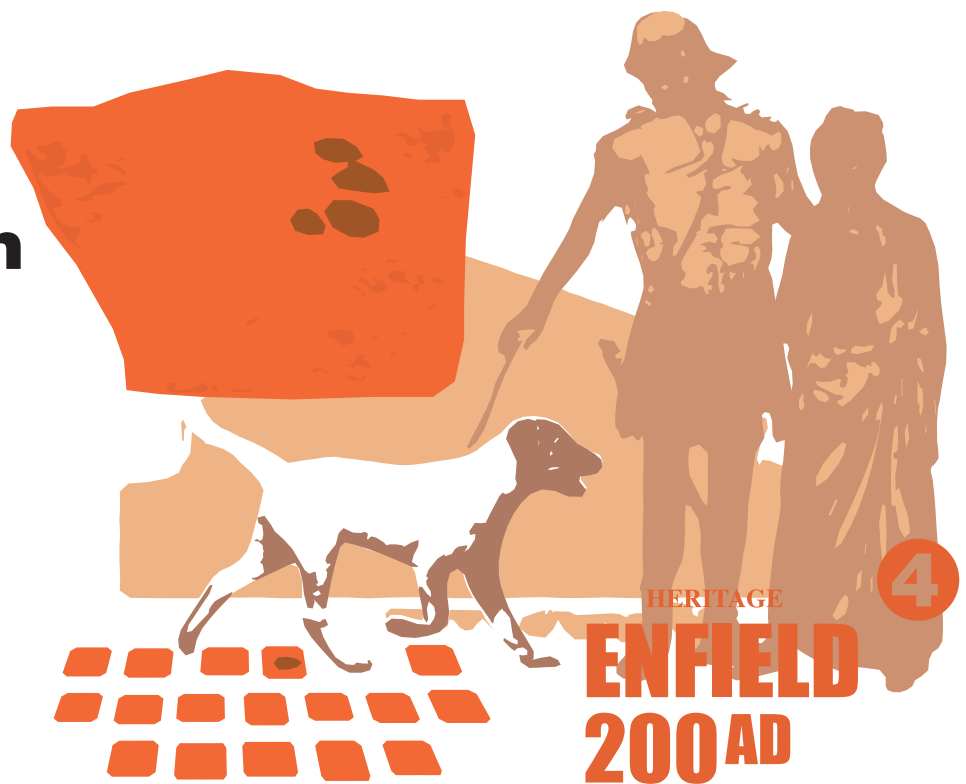
We understand that in addition to the proposal to close the ground floor exhibition space, there is a plan to replace the current structure of (staff) with just one Museum Officer, who would be employed at one grade below the current Officer role. The lack of any budget for the one remaining staff member would make it impossible to stage any activities or programmes. Our experience of other museums marooned on the 1st floor of council buildings tells us that the remaining museum would receive few visitors and would quickly stagnate. Moreover, the loss of Arts Council Museum Accreditation, which would result from the staff cuts and the closure of the ground floor space, would mean the museum would lose its eligibility to

attract external funding for any activities. Enfield Museum has already taken a significant share of cuts in the 2011 round, yet despite this the tiny remaining staff structure (-) has continued to deliver very good value for money for the council. It is clear that the further proposal to close the ground floor exhibition space and reduce staff to just one member would mean that the exhibition programme and all other activities described above would cease completely, depriving the people of Enfield of a much loved service. We reiterate that we do appreciate the very difficult decisions that councils such as Enfield currently have to make. We would argue however that the further cuts envisaged would cause disproportionate harm to the council's cultural offer, relative to the costs involved in continuing the service.

SAVE ENFIELD MUSEUMS & ARCHIVES

We hope that the proposals to cut these small services will be withdrawn but if the threat continues we plan to take our campaign to the next level. More robust messages and action will then aim to change the Council's decision but will also, most likely, cause embarrassment.

Plans are already in place for this. Keep an eye on the local press and for info from groups working to save these services.



This is the Roman dog that in 200AD ran over a wet clay roof tile. The tile was later used on a Roman house at Bush Hill park in Enfield. Found two thousand years later it is today just one of the millions of objects and documents that can be found at Enfield Museums & Archives services.

'Enfield 229' comes from the reference number for one of the oldest objects in the museum's collection Bd.229; a mammoth tooth from 10,000 years ago. Found in 1909 it was displayed at Southgate town hall in 1914 and was so popular that it inspired the creation of our Borough's first Museum.

The Archives service had to wait 9000 years until it gained the first human document; a deed from 1271 where Simon Magna Benfleet rented out some land to Thomas Dewodehon at the cost of two pence.

These and thousands more objects and documents are owned by you the public and cared for by two small Council teams of experienced professionals.

This newsletter has been put together by a number of concerned Enfieldians to highlight the proposals to extinguish the local Museums and the Archives services. The information and details contained within this newsletter is, to the best of our knowledge, correct.

We would like to thank all those helping network amongst the different individuals and organisations supporting the campaign against the proposals and cuts. Thanks also to those who copy us in on the letters they are sending. We are happy for this newsletter to be copied as part of any related discussion.

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STOP PRESS

- We have just been told that Enfield Council anticipate a final decision on the proposal to be made by the end of November this year. That most probably will be a final cabinet or full council meeting.
- So the crucial decisions about the reality of the cuts will most likely be made in a matter of days when Councillor Orhan meets with finance officers and reflects on the consultation. That immediate decision may present a continued need for action if the proposal and threat to the museums and archives continues.