

Report to Cabinet

22 July 2021

By the Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture

DECISION REQUIRED



**Horsham
District
Council**

Not Exempt

Horsham Museum – Opening hours

Executive Summary

Horsham Museum is currently closed due to the impact of Covid-19. The displays are being refurbished in readiness for re-opening in autumn 2021.

In order to:

- Improve accessibility
- Maximise the customer experience
- Ensure safety of staff, volunteers and customers within the Museum
- Ensure effective use of staff time
- Modernise the Museum offer

It is proposed that the Museum has a flexible approach and is able to amend opening days and hours when needed and in response to customer patterns.

Initially to be open to the public up to five days a week:

- Reopening regularly Tuesday – Saturday, 10am-4pm
- With the ability to trial Sunday openings on key weekends
- To be able to have a flexible approach if needed (for example shorter or longer opening hours when needed)
- With the potential to be open on both Saturdays and Sundays in the future (and for the Museum to be closed to the public for two days within the working week), if customer demand evidences that this is a better service offer. To also potentially be open on some bank holidays.

Members will be kept informed and updated. We will regularly communicate and engage with the Museum visitors, Friends and volunteers.

Recommendations

That the Cabinet is recommended:

- i) To delegate authority for the decision on altering opening hours at Horsham Museum to the Director of Community Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Leisure and Culture.

Reasons for Recommendations

The ability to have a flexible approach to opening hours will enable the service to focus its resources effectively to serve the needs of its customers, volunteers and other stakeholders.

Background Papers

None

Wards affected: All wards

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Background Information

1 Introduction and Background

- 1.1 Horsham Museum has been closed to the public since the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, in-line with Government legislation. It is currently undergoing refurbishment and improvement of exhibition displays ready for reopening in autumn 2021.
- 1.2 Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Museum was open to the public six days a week (Monday – Saturday), 10am-5pm.
- 1.3 Many museums throughout the UK are open during the weekend and are closed for one – two days in the week instead, to ensure that they are as accessible as possible for all visitors. This particularly enables children, young people and families to access museums during the weekend. Many museums also open on occasional/regular evenings.

2 Relevant Council policy

- 2.1 The decision supports the Corporate Plan. In enabling Horsham Museum to open in a flexible manner it fits within the goal: 'A Great Place to Live' – providing culture opportunities to improve the health and wellbeing of our communities. The decision also supports the goal: 'A modern and flexible council' – the Council continues to provide quality, value for money services that people need throughout the 2020s.

3 Details

- 3.1 Horsham Museum was closed during the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, in-line with Government legislation. Due to the nature of the building, which doesn't lend itself to social distancing requirements, the decision was made to keep the Museum closed throughout the initial stages of the pandemic. Instead, an improvement programme with investment in the displays was undertaken. The refurbished Museum is expected to reopen in autumn 2021.
- 3.2 As part of the re-opening plans we are looking at the possibility of changing opening hours to provide more flexibility to the service. Rather than having fixed opening hours, we would like the ability to be open any day of the week (including Sundays and some bank holidays) and to be able to open early or late if needed.
- 3.3 Initially, it is likely that we would wish to open to the public five days a week, to enable staff to have appropriate time off and to effectively recruit additional volunteers. This would also allow staff to spend one day a week carrying out focused work, behind the scenes at the Museum, without needing to respond to visitors. Therefore, it is likely that the Museum would be open from Tuesday to Saturday with occasional Sundays on a trial basis (when open on both a Saturday and Sunday, the Museum would be closed for two days during the working week, potentially a Monday and Tuesday).

- 3.4 There are strong marketing and engagement opportunities with local community groups, particularly for trialling initial occasional Sunday openings. These may be linked to special events in the town or to celebrate key historical moments for the District. It is proposed that the first Sunday trial will take place during the re-opening weekend in the autumn.
- 3.5 Depending on visitor numbers into the town at weekends, there is potential for the Museum to be open on Saturdays and Sundays every week as well as possibly some bank holidays. This is a longer-term option, it will be trialled and we will respond to the evidence of visitor numbers and feedback. Sunday opening hours would be restricted and aligned with Sunday retail trading hours.
- 3.6 The core opening hours would be standardised and marketed effectively so that there is no confusion from visitors. However, with a flexible approach, the hours would be able to be regularly reviewed to ensure that they fit the season, the specific exhibitions on offer and any changes in visitor behaviour. This flexibility in opening hours should ensure that the Museum and exhibitions are more easily accessible to all sectors of the community.
- 3.7 Horsham Museum is reliant on the excellent team of volunteers who give their time to support the service. Many of the volunteers are in the at-risk categories for Covid-19 and, as such, are uncertain about ongoing commitment to all aspects of the changing nature of the Museum. There is a need to expand this support, carrying out a recruitment campaign to attract and retain additional volunteers. A flexible approach to opening hours would also enable the staff to respond accordingly to ensure appropriate time is spent in recruiting, training and supporting the volunteers.
- 3.8 Officers will take a pragmatic approach to all operational aspects at Horsham Museum such as ad-hoc closure or shortened opening hours if due to staff or volunteer shortages the Museum cannot be safely opened to the public.
- 3.9 As part of the refurbishment programme and reopening plans, the longer-term digital offer and modernisation of the service is also underway, looking at opportunities to improve the customer experience and widen access to the Museum's collection and information about the District's rich heritage.

4 Next Steps

- 4.1 To reopen the Museum in autumn 2021.

5 Views of the Policy Development Advisory Group and Outcome of Consultations

- 5.1 Leisure and Culture PDAG members were consulted on 14 July 2021.
- 5.2 The Monitoring Officer and the Director of Corporate Resources have been consulted and no legal concerns have been raised.

- 5.3 The Human Resources & Organisational Development Manager has been consulted.
- 5.4 Friends of Horsham Museum have also been consulted.

6 Other Courses of Action Considered but Rejected

- 6.1 To keep the opening hours the same as they were when the Museum was last open, before the Covid-19 pandemic. This is possible and offers continuity for previous visitors. However, the pandemic has forced a long break on the service and so the reopening is a good time to make changes to the opening hours. The proposed way forward should ensure that the Museum is more accessible for additional visitors.
- 6.2 Agreeing new fixed opening hours. Maximum flexibility is needed due to the uncertainty for both the changing nature of visitor expectations as well as the ability to recruit volunteers to support the museum as we come out of the pandemic.

7 Resource Consequences

- 7.1 There are no financial resource consequences.

8 Legal Considerations and Implications

- 8.1 There are no legal comments arising. Specific legal advice has been given and further will be provided as required.

9 Risk Assessment

- 9.1 There are always possibilities of reputational damage, confusion and community perception surrounding changes to a service. The aims are to improve accessibility through the flexible approach to opening hours, so we are not anticipating a negative response. The reopening of the Museum will be managed through consistent messaging within HDC communications to visitors, volunteers, Friends of the Museum and the public.

10 Procurement implications

- 10.1 None

11. Equalities and Human Rights implications / Public Sector Equality Duty

- 11.1 None – the proposal is to improve accessibility, therefore this should not exclude or disproportionately impact any groups with protected characteristics.

12 Environmental Implications

- 12.1 None

13 Other Considerations

- 13.1 Any implications regarding GDPR and data protection legislation have been considered. Regular security patrols during periods of closure are in place and will continue to mitigate any crime and disorder difficulties.