

# Executive summary

## 0.1 Cecil Higgins Art Gallery and Bedford Museum development project overview

The vision for the project is to unite the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery and Bedford Museum as one joined-up public service and first class visitor experience. Building on the core collections of the Gallery and Museum, the new facility will include interactive and hands-on displays of historical art and local heritage alongside high quality art collections.

Familiar objects and stories will be enjoyed alongside new and innovative approaches to presenting and exploring Bedford's past, present and future, with world-class collections on loan from major national museums.

The vision is for a new physical complex, with completely refurbished and revitalised buildings and the addition of new visitor services, as an attractive destination for a variety of user types. The combined facility will bring a wider range of visitors to the site and to the town, making longer and more fulfilling visits and directly contributing to the regeneration of Bedford's town centre.

The new facility will be:

- A new landmark to provide a physical manifestation of local identity and ambition that communicates beyond the local area, contributing to a regional sense of place. A new cultural complex will open up the opportunity to connect rural and urban areas of the Borough and serve all communities.
- A centre for tourism and major feature of the Borough's tourism strategy and planning.
- A focus for the new town centre heritage interpretation strategy which seeks to knit together the presentation of heritage throughout Bedford.
- A learning hub, to provide a focus for all forms of community learning and an accessible forum for developing ideas and understanding.
- A space to celebrate and foster creativity within the activities of the facility, the people it services and throughout its management and operation.
- An agent for change, as an active and dynamic organisation which makes a difference to people's lives and well being.
- An urban pioneer, leading the development of the Castle Lane cultural area and the closer physical and conceptual integration of cultural facilities to the life of the town.

- An example of best practice for the region, demonstrating how culture, collections and creativity can be developed within a local context with maximum impact.

## 0.2 Findings and implications from the research

An extensive programme of research was conducted as part of this study, together with earlier quantitative research, to gather feedback about the proposal and research attitudes to existing and potential provision at the Museum and Art Gallery.

Considerable potential has been identified through the review to develop engagement of different groups. The plans to develop the spaces within the Museum and Art Gallery would be welcomed and consultees were very enthusiastic about future opportunities to take advantage of new and enhanced facilities and to further develop partnerships to enhance the presence outside the building.

It is clear that there is significant support for the development project and planned improvements to access, spaces and displays across the range of potential user communities, as well as among partners and stakeholders.

Key implications from the research pertinent to the next stages of the development can be summarised as follows:

- The idea for the project generated a very positive response, both from those who currently use the Museum and Gallery and those who do not. This was consistent across the focus groups, interviews and the Citizens' Panel research.
- The sense of civic pride in Bedford is very high and it is notable that people feel that the Museum and Gallery is the only place locally to celebrate local culture and heritage. The research supports the assumption that a combined facility with improved visitor facilities and a more hands-on and relevant exhibitions programme would entice non-users to the space.
- Both users and non users from of the Museum and Gallery want the space to be somewhere that they will be proud of and will want to take visitors to. It is of note that many felt that the new CHAG:BM space should compete with a trip to a London museum or gallery. CHAG:BM has a real opportunity in addressing this local aspiration.
- One of the key issues is the fact that people are not aware of the Museum and Gallery and what is currently provided. Many of the suggestions from groups were for activities which the Museum and/or Gallery already run. This is clearly an issue of communication, and in demonstrating relevance to local communities. There is acknowledgment that progress has been made over the past few years in developing community links and widening participation, and consultees are enthusiastic for this to continue and to develop further. Improved facilities, exhibitions and

events will need to be paralleled by an equal effort in networking and communicating with Bedford's communities.

- A strong brand for Bedford, which makes it stand out from other UK towns and cities, is its reputation as a people's town and (to a large extent) a model of cultural integration. It will be important to bring this aspect of Bedford's sense of place out in the exhibitions. Linked to this is the story of immigration to Bedford over time, the notion of Bedford as a "Frontier Town" which can be linked to Bedford's modern day links to the rest of the world.
- The high number of loyal, core visitors and family users indicates a that current users enjoy visiting the spaces. Users, while expressing a wish not to dilute the experience, are positive about the plans to combine the facilities and there is potential to build upon this local user base to further develop engagement of other target groups. With the exception of non family users and Friends, people already tend to see the Museum and Gallery as one space and are interested in ways in which integration could provide more depth to a visit, whether through linked stories and interpretation, or by bringing aspects of the collections together for display.
- The Museum and Gallery development is viewed as a crucial part of the Cultural Quarter development and that which will make the Quarter concept visible to the wide public. The development will need to consider the opportunities to link with other partners, events and activities, presenting a joined up picture of what the Cultural Quarter has to offer to the people of Bedford and beyond.
- In relation to potential integration of the Museum and Gallery, there was much support for the idea that aspects of the collections could be brought together, either through display or through linked interpretation. This could be particularly strong where 'stories' can be told through highlighting aspects of both collections during a visit, especially for the family or education market. Stories might relate to, for example, the story of lace from the creation of new styles, to the lace industry, through to depiction in art. Likewise, there is potential to tell historical stories, such as the role of immigrant communities in Bedford through the twentieth century and today.
- Some aspects of the collections are deemed to be unique and of sufficient draw and interest to be retained as exhibitions in their own right: in particular the Victorian House, Burges collection and watercolour collections.
- There is potential to add value to the brand of the new Museum and Gallery by promoting its role as a creative education space. Its existing strong reputation for formal education provision, together with plans to enhance the early years and adult education provision, should allow the new facility to make some bold statements about its role in actively engaging people with art, heritage and skill development. This can also help to overcome the misconception of a rather static space with not enough hands-on opportunities.

- A number of barriers which either prevent people from using the current facilities, or hamper a visit, have been identified through this study (detailed in chapter 3).
- The barriers detailed have been considered (especially related to spaces, communications and networks) in the action plan for audience development at CHAG:BM (see chapter 5). It is important to consider all barriers and steps to overcome them in creating the aspiration of an inclusive and welcoming new facility.