



Saffron Walden Museum

Interim Forward Plan 2025 - 27

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Saffron Walden Museum:

Uttlesford District Council & Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd

MMWG Approval date: [16 April 2025]

UDC Cabinet Approval date: [8 May 2025]

Due for Review: Jan 2026

Executive Summary

Against the backdrop of struggling council finances, our nearly 200-year-old Museum, with its collections of local, regional, and national significance, popular displays, creative programming, and strong community support, deserves a plan which ensures it is sustainable and fit for the future. The museum has evolved for generations, as a vital research resource, with engaging collections, for future generations to enjoy. In light of the council's financial difficulties the focus of the museum's development plan has switched in 2023-24 quickly and dramatically from planning a major capital project, to streamlining the existing service to ensure its long-term sustainability. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the future of the museum, significant staff changes and redundancies in 2023-24 and '24-25, the team have remained focussed and energised, delivering creative public programming and continuous improvement on all fronts. This forward plan for 2025-27 focuses on future development and sustainability, taking into account limited council funds being available and the likelihood of major local government reorganisation from 2026-27 onwards.

1 Museum's Statement of Purpose

The Museum Service's aim is to give people inspiration and a sense of place in Uttlesford district / north-west Essex, through exploration of our wide-ranging collections and the histories they represent.

The Museum's mission is to engage a larger and more diverse audience with our outstanding collections of local, regional and worldwide significance, to benefit the local community, visitors, and global users, and to improve the Museum's sustainability.

Our aim is to make Saffron Walden Museum

1. A museum which everyone knows and where everyone is welcome.
2. A museum where people are excited and inspired by outstanding collections.
3. A museum which treasures learning and reaches beyond the building.
4. A museum which conserves its architectural heritage, as one of the oldest purpose-built local museums, while meeting modern requirements in a manner compatible with its historic environment on the Walden Castle site.
5. A museum which is sustainable and with an enhanced diversity of income streams and community support

The Values which will inform our approach include:

Valuing Heritage and People - premises fit for purpose, excellence of care and presentation, visitors' and users' needs addressed, workforce (paid and voluntary) supported and able to develop skills and knowledge.

Sustainability – of the Museum, Environment, Financial, Community support, Wellbeing

Diversity and Connectivity – of Collections and their stories, Audience + Workforce; Access physical + intellectual; Biodiversity + use of site for many activities

2 A Brief History of the Museum

a) Origins

The Museum was founded by Saffron Walden Natural History Society and opened in 1835 in the Museum building, which sets it apart as being one of the earliest purpose-built local museums and is a grade II listed building. The collections reflected the wide-ranging ambitions of its original trustees and benefactors to 'bring the world to Walden' and showcase the diversity of the natural and human world, as well as collections of local origin from north-west Essex and the surrounding region. The collections were curated by Society members until the appointment of the first salaried curator in 1880.

b) Collections

Today, the Museum presents the human history and natural environment of north-west Essex (Uttlesford district), as well as significant non-local collections, a legacy of its founders' vision – principally world cultures, decorative arts, and Egyptology. The collections are estimated at around 175,000 objects and specimens. The archaeology collections are increasing extensively, as the museum is a repository for archaeological depositions from units undertaking surveys and excavations in the district.

c) Site and Buildings

The site on which the Museum is located, is a scheduled ancient monument, being the former bailey area of Walden Castle, of which the ruined Norman keep survives nearby. The Museum stands on a strip of land along the north side of the site which is owned by Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd but leased to Uttlesford District Council. The Castle and surrounding grass area are owned and managed separately by Uttlesford District Council. The tennis courts opposite the Museum are on land owned by Audley End Estates but leased to the Castle Hill Tennis Club. The Shire Hill offsite store was completed in 2015, it occupies land leased by Uttlesford District Council to Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd for 999 years; the Museum Society owns the building, and it is leased to Uttlesford District Council to operate as part of the Museum service, thus putting all the museum buildings under the same lease agreement between the Museum Society and Council.

d) Governance and staffing

Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd is a successor of Saffron Walden Natural History Society and is a registered charity. It owns the Museum buildings and the collections and ran the Museum Service with the aid of various grants until the 1970s when the newly formed Uttlesford District Council took over responsibility for running the Museum Service, with the buildings and collections on lease to the Council. Under the current management agreement for the Service, the Council is responsible for providing staff and revenue budgets, while the Society uses its charitable status to help raise funds for capital projects. The Museum Society applies interest from invested funds to purchases and other special projects for the collections.

The core staff team is approximately 4 full-time equivalents: Interim Curator, Museum Support Officer, Learning & Outreach Officer, Collections Assistant, Community Engagement Officer and Natural Sciences Officer. For Weekend and Bank Holiday staffing there are two permanent Visitor Services Assistant posts and a small team of casual-contract Museum Assistants. There are approximately 50 volunteers, operating the Welcome Desk and helping with collections and administrative tasks, and with learning

activities and events. Museum Society directors and officers also give their time and expertise voluntarily.

3 Review of the Previous Forward Plan

The Resilient Heritage project funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) in 2019 provided an Options Appraisal & Feasibility Study (Fourth Street, 2020) and an Audience Development Plan (Julia Holberry Associates, 2020). A development plan was produced to improve public engagement, income, and sustainability.

In October 2021 the NLHF approved the Museum's Expression of Interest for funding for a development project called *Transforming Saffron Walden Museum for the 21st Century*. The scheme was costed at approximately £4.4m. The vision was for an extension which would include a learning suite, exhibitions gallery and refreshment offer. In the existing core building the reception area, galleries and office space would be redesigned in line with energy efficiency and climate change goals. The associated activity programme focused on attracting a greater diversity of visitors and reimagining the museum as a community hub.

In May 2022, just a few weeks before the planned submission date, the stage one application was suspended due to the sharp rise in inflation and an unexpected demand from Historic England, for heritage/historic impact assessments, design & access statement, and metric digital surveys. Quotations were obtained and briefs written but the Council and Museum Society both decided not to fund the surveys due to financial pressures. The key priorities had shifted.

Overall, significant progress was made on achieving the objectives set out in the previous Forward plans, despite continuing IT, heating, and maintenance difficulties. The documentation of the collections continued, improvements were made to the interpretation and visitor welcome. The museum responded well to the covid pandemic, with appropriate signage and procedures, switched focus to generating online content, introduced online event booking (Arts Tickets), click, and collect activity packs for families and an EPOS till, contactless payment system. The Castle was conserved with joint UDC and Historic England funding, although the mortar didn't hold due to extreme summer temperatures, and therefore it has been closed to public access since the Autumn of 2022.

In light of the council's financial difficulties the focus of the museum's development plan switched in 2023-24 quickly and dramatically from planning a major capital project, to streamlining the existing service to ensure its long-term sustainability. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the future of the museum, significant staff changes and redundancies in 2023-24 and '24-25, the team have remained focussed and energised, delivering creative public programming and continuous improvement on all fronts. This forward plan for 2025-27 focuses on future development and sustainability, taking into account limited council funds being available and the likelihood of major local government reorganisation from 2026-27 onwards.

4 Analysis of the Current Environment

In May 2023 UDC produced a new Corporate Plan based on four strategic priorities:

1. Protecting and enhancing our environment
2. Building strong communities
3. Encouraging economic growth
4. Putting residents first

Although the Museum isn't specifically referenced in the Corporate Plan, the museum is clearly well-placed to support issues such as local biodiversity and climate-change awareness and has been doing so through its exhibitions and project work in recent years. The Museum works closely with and supports a range of community groups, recent examples including a home-educated group called The Cabin, Uttlesford Food Bank and the Community Shed.

The Museum's estimated economic contribution to Saffron Walden's economy was assessed by the National Annual Museum Survey in 2023, but there is scope to increase its economic impact and bring more visitors in to the area if the Museum's development aims can ultimately be pursued:

Saffron Walden Museum's Economic Impact of Visitors figures 2022/23:

Local Visitors: £22,687

Day Visitors: £51,167

Due to a period of exceptional challenge for local government finances, all council services across UDC are being reviewed over the next 4 years under a programme called Blueprint Uttlesford. The museum has been selected for the first phase meaning that development plans referenced above are now on hold pending the review. Saffron Walden and the Uttlesford District are affluent areas, but all local arts and cultural organisations are facing cuts and changes in their operating practices. Saffron Screen (independent cinema) and Saffron Hall (independent concert hall) have both been under financial pressure.

The Curator (Museum Manager) retired in October 2023, after 23 years dedicated service. The existing Collections Officer (Human History) was seconded to the role of Interim Curator. In the Spring of 2024, the roles of Saturday Assistant, Security & Premises Officer, and Administrative & Front of House Officer were made redundant, due to council budget cuts. The gap in staffing, put the team under considerable pressure throughout the Spring and Summer. Subsequently, we recruited a Collections Assistant to provide partial backfill cover for the Collections Officer post and recruited to a newly created role of Museum Support Officer. Sarah Kenyon, Natural Sciences Officer retired from the Council on ill-health grounds in July 2024 after 24 years working in the museum. In January 2025 this role is now being recruited as a newly created role of Community Engagement Officer, to enable us to make more impact across the district.

Announcements in early 2025, show that there is likely to be major local government re-organisation in 2026-27, which will significantly change the sector.

5 Action Plan

Aim	Objectives	Resourcing
<p>To engage a larger and more diverse audience for the benefit of the local community and to improve the Museum's sustainability.</p>	<p>Network with key organisations in Saffron Walden and Uttlesford to ensure the museum is maximising it's potential: TIC, BID, Initiative, arts & cultural organisations e.g. forum meetings, "1647" Heritage Development group, etc.</p> <p>Plan exhibitions and events with audiences in mind to ensure they are visitor focussed and commercially appealing.</p> <p>Plan our marketing budget to ensure good coverage in the district. Exploit free editorial and online opportunities.</p> <p>Market the museum more actively as a community hub.</p> <p>Focus on attracting more low income families and visitors / users from parts of Uttlesford district more distant from Saffron Walden.</p> <p>Explore the viability of hiring in blockbuster commercial exhibitions – e.g., Paddington, Tiger that Came to Tea, etc.</p> <p>Liaise with UDC council departments - community development, sheltered housing, etc. Social prescribing.</p>	<p>Time and staffing resource needed to be able to network effectively.</p> <p>Devise and publish an updated Marketing Strategy and Audience Development Action Plan.</p> <p>Establish outreach through Rural Tourism Grant (REPF) £10,000 Jan – March 2025</p> <p>Recruit Community Engagement Officer</p> <p>Climate change display panels hiring in March 2025.</p>
<p>A museum that everyone knows and where everyone is welcome.</p>	<p>Improve gate and entrance signage.</p> <p>Improving visitor experience through cost efficient aesthetic improvements to welcome desk and shop area.</p> <p>Explore offering basic refreshments in school holidays around the</p>	<p>Budget for signage vinyls</p> <p>Take on maintenance volunteers.</p> <p>MDSE Access Audit Grant £2,000</p>

	<p>activity programme, to increase dwell time.</p> <p>Exploit free editorial to raise profile of the museum.</p>	<p>Take advantage of corporate social responsibility projects (UCAN & Saffron Walden Building Society), to help repaint and improve areas of the museum and its grounds.</p>
<p>A museum where people are excited and inspired by outstanding collections</p>	<p>Review what is available in storage which could be leveraged to attract a broader audience.</p> <p>Add more interactive elements to the permanent displays.</p> <p>Climate & Ecology Hub in the Discovery Centre, and associated activities.</p> <p>Leverage the history of the collections and their regional and national significance.</p> <p>Exploit free editorial to promote the collections.</p> <p>Experiment with new events and initiatives focussed on the collections, but with more mainstream commercial appeal – sport, fashion, food, music, etc. e.g., escape room activities, night at the museum. Silent disco. Birthday parties. Curator for a day experience (red letter days style).</p>	<p>Staff levels permitting.</p> <p>Need to maintain effective collections management – good movement and location control, quality collections catalogue records, preventative conservation and managing collections risks.</p> <p>MDSE Income generation grant £500 – printing press – retail and related activities</p>
<p>A museum which treasures learning and reaches beyond the building</p>	<p>Closer connection with schools and learning organisations. Regular digital and paper-based mailouts to schools, to increase take up.</p> <p>Outreach events, partner with other organisations and attend town and district community events.</p> <p>Capitalise on the new website. Train up staff and volunteers to be</p>	<p>Staffing permitted, as many external community events are outside standard working hours.</p> <p>Recruit Community Engagement Officer</p> <p>Establish outreach through Rural Tourism Grant (REPF) £10,000 Jan – March 2025</p>

	involved with digital outreach (social media, on-line publications).	Gibson Walden Grant £1,000 for portable display cases. “Museum in a Box” Utilise outreach contacts and work for the Wonders: 190 Years temporary exhibition
A museum which conserves its architectural heritage, as one of the oldest purpose-built local museums, whilst providing modern facilities.	Sympathetic maintenance and development work (listed building) Reduce carbon footprint and energy consumption. Improving physical, sensory, and intellectual access	Liaise with UDC Facilities and Council Surveyor Place Services, ECC. Environmental Plan. MDSE & MA training courses. MDSE Access Audit Grant £2,000 Consider applying for a smaller lottery grant in the band of projects up to £250,000 to modernise the museum further before 2027.
A museum which is sustainable, with an enhanced diversity of income streams and community support	Cost control, work closely with UDC accountant. Identify inefficiencies and streamline all processes and procedures to maximise efficiency. Rationalise paper based files. Dispose of old AV equipment and display materials no longer needed to maximise space. Sell (non-collection) book collections for fundraising. Consider alternative governance structures and funding streams, to	UDC and Finance team advice as needed. Revamp museum shop and stock. Sell (non-collection) book collections for fundraising. Inorganic store re-organised to be a resource room, to improve efficiency. MDSE & MDO advice.

Appendix A - Museum Service Forward Plan 2025-2027

	<p>ensure the long term sustainability of the museum service.</p> <p>Re-energise the Museum Society- promote joining as a member as well as committee and board opportunities.</p>	<p>MDSE Income generation grant £500</p> <p>Fundraising training and advice. Fundraising Strategy.</p> <p>Skills Audit and Recruitment campaign for the Museum Society</p> <p>Trusts and Foundations for development funding support</p> <p>Establish a Museum Friends group for the museum</p>
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