

Proposed redevelopment of Hereford Art Gallery and Museum, Broad Street Hereford

Hereford's bid to the Stronger Towns Fund – submitted January 2021

Members will be aware that improvements to the fabric of the Hereford Museum and Art Gallery building in Broad Street are long overdue. A few years ago, the discovery of asbestos during alterations being made to the entrance foyer led to the closure of the building for several months. Following that, the Woolhope Club room, situated on the first floor, was threatened by water damage from water leakage from the roof into the vacant upper floor; a situation which necessitated the removal of all the Club's library books and closure of the room for a period of about a year. In addition, the Club room is not fully accessible due to the short flight of steps leading down to it from the Museum Gallery where the lift is situated. It is therefore welcome news that Herefordshire Council now has plans to substantially refurbish the entire building.

The immediate catalyst for this has been the production of the Town Investment Plan (TIP) for Hereford which was approved by Herefordshire Council in January 2021 and submitted to central government for approval. Hereford had been earmarked to receive up to £25m from a £1.6 billion fund launched in 2019 which is targeted at towns to help create new jobs, train local people and boost economic growth. The local bid was compiled under the supervision of a Stronger Towns Board. You can find full details, including a link to download a copy of the full TIP document, at <https://strongerhereford.co.uk/>. The TIP outlines a range of projects selected to deliver a vision of a 'fairer, greener Hereford'. Although the funding scheme required the programme to be framed as a bid for the city, the emphasis on building infrastructure and developing digital skills means that real benefits should be felt right across the county. One impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been greater recognition of the potential for cultural services to boost economic growth and regeneration.

The TIP programme includes plans to dedicate the whole of the current museum and library building as a county museum and art gallery. The city library will move to a new library and learning centre in Maylord Orchard, which is now owned by the Council. Both projects will be led by Herefordshire Council and together signal a very positive new future for the cultural services they run. Members may be aware that just two years ago the Council were actively pursuing reductions to service budgets and the outsourcing of these services, so the shift to substantial investment is a very welcome change in policy.

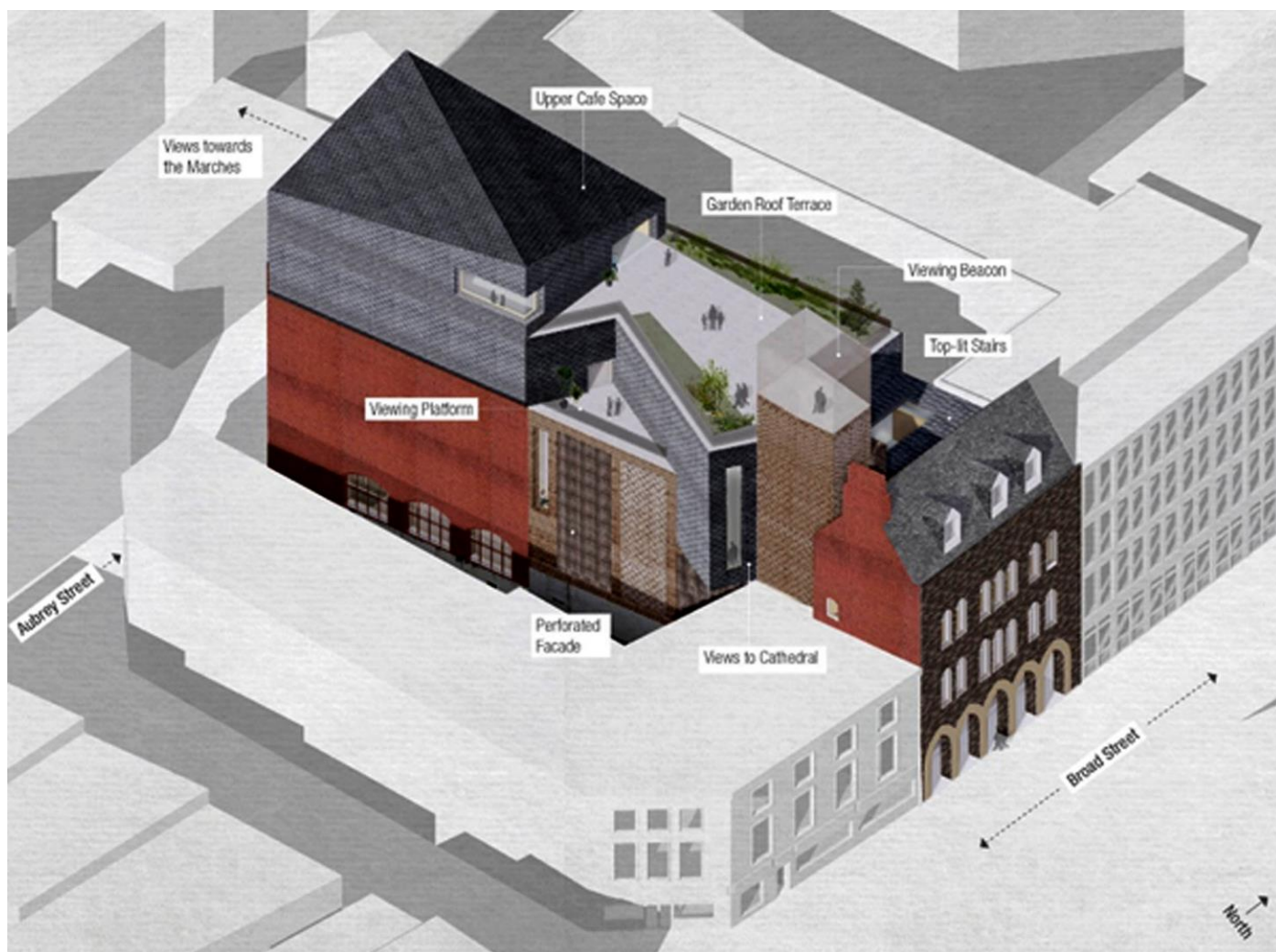
Aside from the proposed development of new physical spaces to house the county collections and provide a library, some of the other projects in the TIP also offer significant opportunities to improve delivery of the county's cultural services. These include a digital culture hub, led by Rural Media, and a digital skills foundry led by the new university (NMIITE) and Hereford College of Arts. These may well be based close to the new library in Maylord Orchard.

New Museum and Art Gallery Project

Preliminary details of the plans for the Broad Street building indicate this is an ambitious project which will maintain the Victorian façade to the building, the Woolhope Room, and other notable historic features, while transforming other internal and external spaces. It is estimated that the usable interior space of the whole building will be at least doubled to enable a significant increase in the overall gallery space as well as new facilities including a café and shop. It is intended the building will be completed to high standards of 'EnerPHit' design which will improve the physical environment and reduce running costs. All areas of the new development will be fully accessible. The indicative cost of the building is expected to be around £15m. The TIP will provide £5m and Herefordshire Council £5m leaving a very substantial balance still to be secured. It is anticipated that the majority of this will come from grants from Heritage Lottery Fund, Arts Council and other funders but there will be a need for local fundraising.

Details of the interior redesign are at a very preliminary stage but the most radical changes are likely to be in the conversion of space currently used for the library into new exhibition galleries. The vision for the entire installation is yet to be determined but may well emphasise Herefordshire's place in the history of the Marches. There will be space for several permanent galleries to explore the history of Herefordshire, including one dedicated to the Herefordshire Hoard of Saxon gold, which is likely to be offered to the county in the next year. There will be provision for display of some of the Art Collection, including the works of Brian Hatton. In addition, there will be room for temporary exhibitions which will enable provision of a more varied programme of temporary displays and bring national touring exhibitions into the county on a regular basis. Overall, it will provide an opportunity for a greater proportion of the collections stored safely, but with very limited access at the Museum Resource Centre in Friar Street, to be put on public display.

The images published in the TIP document indicate the potential transformation envisaged. These may include the creation of a rooftop garden providing views over Hereford and beyond, along with a new entry in to the rear of the building from Aubrey Street. The façade is listed, but there may be an opportunity to remove the more recent glazed windows to reinstate the original open colonnade.



Due to the tight timescale for development and submission of the TIP, the outline project was developed over the course of just a few months with limited stakeholder engagement. The proposal was based on input from the Museum service and Archytype, the architects who were responsible for the design of the new archive building at HARC in Rotherwas. We are pleased to report that the Woolhope Club, along with Herefordshire Museum Service Support Group, were kept informed of broad intentions and are recognised as stakeholders in the project. The Club therefore expects to have further involvement in the development of the project.

The response from central government is expected in April 2021 after which there will be a further twelve month period in which to develop a full business case for approved projects. Allowing for design and planning processes, the earliest any building works could start is April 2022 and it is assumed redevelopment would take about two years to complete. If this indicative timescale is achieved, it will mean that the Woolhope Club will not have access to the Club room between Spring 2022 and Spring 2024.

Impact on the Woolhope Room

The Woolhope Room is listed and there are no plans to alter it. As members are aware, the current layout is as the Club library with provision for flexible use of the space to hold small group activities. Positive impacts of the development will include renovation of the frontage and roof as well as internal alterations to ensure the room is fully accessible. A subcommittee, chaired by the President, has been established to liaise with Herefordshire Council on issues relating to renovation of the room and the Club's use of it in the new museum development. There is no indication that this will be reduced or changed in any substantial way.

Members will be provided with regular updates through reports in the Newsletter and by email correspondence. If you have any issues you would like to refer to the subcommittee, then please email the Secretary on woolhopesecretary@gmail.com. In the meantime, please do take time to review the outline of the project and the whole programme proposed by the Town Investment Plan on <https://strongerhereford.co.uk/>. The museum development is described on pages 59-60.

Jane Adams
Woolhope Club, Honorary Secretary.