

Reflections on New Museum Project at Promenade Park – Maldon District Council, February 2026

Introduction

This is a very brief reflection on plans emerging for an extension/development of the existing Museum at Promenade Park, drawing on consultation and engagement through the work on the District-wide Culture and Heritage Strategy.

The new Museum concept is at a fairly advance stage in terms of design and scale, including how this incorporates the existing museum building, other buildings on the site and connectivity to other spaces in the park.

It represents a major opportunity for heritage development in a town/District with a wealth of history – interpretation and improved exhibitions, engagement, audience development and participation (for example volunteers).

Existing Museum

The current building has up to 3,000 visitors a year with a traditional offering relating to the area's past. This is predominantly relating to the Town, but there are examples of exhibitions/themes for other areas – for example most recently working with partners in Althorne (St. Andrew's Church).

Reliant upon volunteers, the existing exhibition provides an insight into the town's heritage with a range of displays, utilising a fairly extensive archive of artefacts and images. However, as those involved with the Museum would accept – the offer is very much that of a voluntary-run heritage centre. Short-term lease and limited capacity and funding limits ambition and there will not be any major change of updating of the museum in the current context.

Stakeholders and Engagement

There are a number of potential local stakeholders who are likely to have an interest in the new museum concept. Including them in some kind of engagement process may support the long-term success of the museum as a collaborative space.

Maldon Museum in the Park – This is the current charity that runs the existing museum in the park. The charity has very limited resources and relies upon a core group of volunteers (including the Trustees of the Charity). 27 volunteers in total (although not all as active as a core group of around 6 or so).

The Museum currently attracts up to 3,000 people per year, a relatively low number given the location in the park. However, the museum is closed throughout the winter months and the key challenge is the inability to plan ahead and develop the offer due (in part) to a rolling 1 Year tenancy at will agreement with MDC. This would limit any organisations' ability to develop and plan for the future and severely restricts any fund raising ambitions (capital or revenue), or indeed accreditation. MDC does not provide any ongoing support for the Museum (apart from a contribution towards insurance costs – approx. £500).

The collection/archive is extensive with the majority of artefacts collected prior to 1997 actually owned by MDC. Post-1997 the majority are in the ownership of the charity (or loans from individuals etc.).

The Trustees/volunteers are all knowledgeable on the history of the area and have a good understanding of key themes, as well as knowledge of the archive materials and visitor interests.

Maldon Town Council – The Town Council part-fund the Maeldune Heritage Centre in the town centre, and also support heritage development for the town through the Maldon Heritage Working Group. The Town Council are also starting work on a Neighbourhood Plan which could have a significant focus on the town's heritage (there is a working group focused on heritage as part of this).

Beyond local government reorganisation (lgr), the Town Council will still be in place and one possibility for the future of the new Museum is for the Town Council to play a significant role in managing/running it. This may not be acceptable or practical, but other town councils do play such roles and could be considered as part of a stakeholder engagement process.

Maeldune Heritage Centre – Supported financially by Maldon Town Council (including one part-time member of staff), and also owned by the Town Council, the Maeldune Heritage Centre is the main heritage space in the town centre. Revenue is also generated through a retail offer of local products and hire of the main (small) exhibition space. The space also houses the Maldon Society's photographic and video archives, as well as the Oral History Listening Station. The exhibition space displays work by local artists and groups, with exhibitions changing regularly throughout the year. Although not a formal Tourist Information Centre (TIC), the space also has a core function as an information centre both for visitors (wayfinding, maps, advice etc.) and for locals (information on services, recycling bags etc.).

The historic Plume library is above the Heritage Centre but with very limited accessibility.

Maldon Archaeological and Historical Group (MAHG) – MAHG undertake active archaeological work across the District, and have done for decades. Very limited capacity and in need of storage for equipment and artefacts. The volunteers for the MAHG are very knowledgeable on the history of Maldon and the wider area, and could contribute to interpretation and potentially volunteering capacity. MAHG are based at Brickhouse Farm Community Centre.

Saltmarsh Coast Tourism Group CIC – This is the proposed new organisation that will take on strategic oversight for tourism (and in particular 'regenerative tourism') across the existing Maldon District boundary (Saltmarsh Coast), overseeing a governance process that enables organisations and individuals from across relevant sectors to collaborate, inform strategy and funding opportunities, network and advocate for the Saltmarsh Coast area. This is particularly relevant into and beyond local government reorganisation and Greater Essex Devolution. MDC are supporting the development of the CIC and the wider governance system, with a launch of the concept on the 19th March.

Although strategic, the CIC will retain oversight of at least three core tourism/heritage programmes – Saltmarsh Coast Walking Festival, Maldon Festival and Heritage Open Days. It is possible therefore (although not being considered or discussed at this stage) that the CIC could have some future role in an important heritage asset such as the Museum, and certainly a supportive/advocacy role in future fundraising, capacity building and interpretation. Further to this, over the coming months, the CIC will be developing a 'Regenerative Tourism Strategy' that is currently in development as part of the wider work on the Culture and Heritage Strategy. The

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Regenerative Tourism Strategy will be an opportunity to identify how tourism can support local distinctiveness and experiences for visitors that also offer sustainability for local heritage, cultural and tourism assets.

Thames Sailing Barge Trust – A major heritage and tourism asset to the town and actively planning to develop activity and some interpretation space at Hythe Quay. Very successful in engaging volunteers with a wide range of skills, and also a commercial success with income from hire of the Barges.

Maldon Society – A Society founded in 1957 with the aim of preserving and promoting the heritage of the town and wider area. They are an active group that hold regular meetings and talk, as well as commenting on planning applications and other relevant policy matters. There is much knowledge in the group on local heritage. They also hold a significant archive of pictures and documents.

Museum of Power – Behind Stow Maries, the Museum of Power is the largest museum and heritage space in the District. Although not in the town centre, it is close and houses an extensive collection combining industrial history, working engines, family-friendly attractions, gardens, and community events. It is set in the former Langford Waterworks site, houses a popular café space and has regular school/educational visits. Their perspective on a new museum for Maldon, and how there might be collaboration, would be valuable given their extensive experience of attracting visitors from both the local area and further afield.

Combined Military Services Museum (CMSM) – Arguably holds one of the key artefacts that the story of Maldon's (and the country's) heritage can be built around. This is the Viking sword that was discovered in Heybridge at the end of the Causeway and dates from the end of the 10th century – the time of the Battle of Maldon (AD 991). The CMSM holds one of the most important and unusual military collections in the UK, with hundreds of years of military, intelligence and special operations history.

The museum has very experienced staff and volunteers and would offer an interesting perspective on the museum/visitor offer in Maldon. It is known that the CMSM struggles to develop its offer given the limited space and significant number of artefacts on display (guns of all sizes, historic weapons etc.). The whole operation (which was initiated from a private collection) works on a low budget and a lot of goodwill from the manager (paid) and a team of volunteers. Investment is needed in the building to reduce energy costs for example.

Outreach

Given timescales it is understandable that a major outreach and engagement process is challenging. However it is still worthwhile considering engaging with local groups and volunteers – particularly those associated with the existing Museum in the Park. A commitment from MDC to fund a significant extension to the Museum space to improve the overall museum/heritage offer for the town is a very good story and one of the most significant capital investments made in heritage/culture and tourism by MDC. It also responds positively to the Promenade Park consultation. It is likely there will be tensions over the different issues relating future management, interpretation, governance etc. (and perhaps broader reaction to building in the park), but this remains a positive story for the town/District and therefore a spirit of openness and collaboration should be the way forward. Without this it is likely that stakeholders, partners and

contributors to future success will be isolated from a process which could deliver what the majority of them want – a much-improved and ambitious approach to heritage interpretation.

The new Museum space will require collaboration with local groups and volunteers who have much knowledge and experience with heritage, archives, outreach and education over many years. Having their support and input (at this stage or at a later stage) is likely to be important to the long-term success of the operation.

One of the key conclusions to be drawn from engagement with the heritage sectors in Maldon Town in particular, is that there is a wealth of experience, knowledge and commitment to the local area. However, the number of small/voluntary organisations working in relative isolation does not support a vibrant sector in terms of funding, volunteers and space etc. There are very few ‘town-wide’ heritage themes explored in collaboration between organisations, and volunteer capacity is limited and tends to be older people (in some cases very much older). A new Museum project could provide impetus through future space/concept that can support local collaboration. It may also help with reaching new potential volunteers (including younger people).

Match/Additional Funding

Although the timescales for the capital build programme are not compatible with undertaking a significant funding application for capital investment in the building to match the approx. £2m that MDC will be committing to the project, there are other opportunities for external investment that could be considered. These relate to heritage interpretation, governance, business planning, activity planning – all of which could be developed while the capital programme is in development and delivery stage. The MDC investment could not necessarily count as ‘match funding’ for external grants for example, but still demonstrates a serious commitment by a local authority in the District’s heritage, culture and visitor economy. The National Lottery Heritage Fund is one option. We have learned of a number of ongoing or planned fairly large bids to NLHF – so competition locally could be an issue and there is a risk that the town looks uncoordinated in its approach to funding for heritage.

Long Term Governance and Management

It appears that the current concept is for MDC to manage the new building ‘in house’, at least initially, on completion of the capital build programme and installation of interpretation/exhibition. MDC currently has no such facility and indeed no Museum Service. This is not unusual for smaller local authorities. If this is to be a new museum with a high-quality exhibition (that evolves over time), programme of outreach and events, space for use by communities and a relationship to be maintained between the café operators (and indeed other operators in the park), management of volunteers, maintenance etc. - then this is a significant undertaking.

The timescale however for the completion of the design, planning, build and opening is early/mid 2028 – the time when the formality of local government reorganisation is scheduled to be complete. Therefore, it is unlikely that MDC will be able to make plans to run the facility as there will be a new unitary authority in place by this time. Future governance is something that could be developed in partnership with the other local authorities through a ‘shadow authority’ that will be in place prior to April 2028 – for example with Chelmsford City Council assuming they are in the same authority. Chelmsford CC have an existing museum service and are capable of incorporating a museum in Maldon into an existing portfolio (which could incorporate other similar spaces from other existing local authorities).

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Alternative options could include working with another local groups or charity (or establishing one), with MDC supporting with capacity building prior to the opening of the building in 2028. The intention being to see the museum as independent from any local authority and able to secure a future in partnership with a range of partners (including the new unitary).

Plans for Cross-Subsidy Model Business Plan/Operational Plan

To reduce the likelihood of significant ongoing public subsidy, the current ambition is for the museum space to be flexible and multi-functional to allow for other uses that can generate revenue (workshops, activities, meetings etc.), and for a commercial café/restaurant offer to provide ongoing revenue into the core operation. This obviously depends upon an informed business plan as managing a café/restaurant offer and making a significant profit is challenging.

If there was significant demand from local groups/businesses etc. to utilise the core space for workshops, events etc. then this could drive good revenue through (although will need managing). However, this could conflict with having a high-quality exhibition as it is likely that this will need to be moved on a regular basis (although use of digital etc. can improve interpretation and experience while also being easy to move).

With a manager and small team in place, along with support of Council colleagues, it will be possible to apply for grants on an ongoing basis, or look for sponsorship etc. where relevant/appropriate. Could this be the local project that Maldon Salt are looking to support??!

Charging for entry can be a good way of raising money, but this very much depends upon the cost and the willingness of visitors to pay (will be a challenge if there isn't new interest/content/exhibitions etc. on a fairly regular basis). The existing museum did charge a small fee for entry, but found that asking for voluntary donations raised just as much. The new museum is likely to be a very different proposition however.

Another issue could be local businesses/hospitality seeing the new café space as competition. The aim of the project is to deliver an improved year-round visitor offer/experience in the park, and this should increase the number of visitors to the area which should benefit all local businesses.

Aspirations for Interpretation

There are obvious themes and historic periods for interpretation including the Battle of Maldon and many other aspects of the town/area's history. This can be explored in more detail as part of the wider interpretation strategy (and some issues are being developed for the Town of Culture application). To support repeat visits by locals and visitors to the town, it will be important to ensure there are updates and changes to the exhibition and an activity programme to support this. Working with other museums and archives across the area can also support new interpretation, displays and activities.

Although not necessarily directly relevant to interpretation, the existing archives/collections are fairly extensive and will need to be stored somewhere when not on display. It is likely that an updated exhibition will be more digitally-focused and utilising narrative and stories to bring the history to life, with sparing use of artefacts to strengthen this approach (i.e. not putting everything on display). Storage therefore is likely to be a significant challenge, and it is likely that the new

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museum will attract interest from people who have important and relevant artefacts or documents relating to the town/area's history (this will require a solid acquisition plan/strategy).

MDC could take on another property elsewhere as a storage / archive space to relieve pressure on the new building. This could support other groups in the area (for example MAHG).

Tourism and Wayfinding

Maeldune Heritage Centre currently operates as a 'tourism information' space as well as wider community support. It is not a formal TIC, but does provide information on local heritage and attractions, some interpretation, artwork by local artists/crafters, the town tapestry and a digital archive on the town's history (belonging to the Maldon Society). The location of the Heritage Centre on the High Street means that it is a core part of the town centre/high street ecology. However, with investment required to maintain the historic building long-term, there could be a case for a strategic discussion with the Town Council to develop a short and longer-term approach to wayfinding and information for visitors in the town centre and park. The opportunity to significantly improve wayfinding in terms of information, trails, and signage from the park to the town centre is one that could be developed from the new Museum (and built into a wider wayfinding strategy that could emerge through the Neighbourhood Plan for example).

The building hosting both the Maeldune Heritage Centre and the historic Plume Library above is in need of capital investment (potentially up to or over £500,000 – not confirmed). Opportunities for the existing Maeldune Centre could include identifying opportunities for the Plume Library to increase interpretation and outreach (given the limited accessibility of the existing library on the first floor of the building), as well as a reconfiguration to support more art exhibitions, café and community space. This would be an additional/improved offer for the town centre, and complement the new Museum. Essentially the Maeldune Centre becomes a community and wayfinding space with space for community gatherings and potentially more engagement with the Plume Library. The new museum becomes the main heritage space for the town.