

Cabinet

28 July 2026

Dorset History Centre – approval sought to proceed with development of capital project For Decision

Cabinet Member:

Cllr R Biggs, Regeneration, Economic Growth and Strategic Assets

Local Councillor(s): All

Senior Leadership Team:

J Mair - Director, Assurance and Governance

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Statutory Authority: Local Government Acts 1962 & 1972; Public Records Act 1958; Freedom of Information Act 2000; Environmental Information Regulations 2004; Data Protection Act (GDPR) 2018.

Report status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

Executive summary: This report provides an update to the Cabinet on the work of the Joint Archives Service (Dorset History Centre) further to the positive result of the service's application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). The 5 March decision and the £603,000 of funding it provided means that development work needs to start on a major project *Past Lives, Future Proofed* which it is expected will result in major capital investment in the Dorset History Centre and a significant programme of public engagement lasting into 2031. The total cost of the project (2 phases) is £5.28 million and is contingent upon a successful Stage 2 application to NLHF. Dorset Council has pledged £540,000 match funding built into the capital programme. This report therefore is seeking the Cabinet's approval to proceed with the development of the project in preparation for the Stage 2 application in November 2027. The project will provide another 30 years of collections storage and extend the working life of Dorset History Centre by decades.

Recommendations: It is recommended that the Cabinet:

1. Approves Dorset History Centre's request to proceed with externally funded development work on its capital project *Past Lives, Future Proofed* further to the anticipated submission of a Stage 2 application to the National Lottery

Heritage Fund in November 2027 for £3.8 million and subsequent Delivery Phase of the project whose total value over both phases is £5.28 million.

2. Delegates authority to the Executive Director for Economy and Environment, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Economic Growth and Strategic Assets to approve spend decisions, including procurement, contract award, and payment of invoices, within the Total Scheme Budget for the Dorset History Centre capital project as detailed in paragraph 4.2. All activity will be undertaken in accordance with Dorset Council's Contract Procedure Rules, Financial Regulations, Scheme of Delegation and applicable law. Procurement of services for the Delivery Phase of the project is contingent upon a successful Stage 2 application to NLHF.
3. Acts as financial guarantor: DHC intends to bridge the current budget gap of £110,000 (see para 4.3) by fundraising from a variety of sources. Work is already underway and we are confident that we will meet our target. However, in the event that this proves challenging, it is requested of Dorset Council that it meets the budget shortfall to ensure the viability of the project and the securing of the large capital grant from NLHF.

Reason for the recommendation: To support and endorse the development of a project that will result in significant inward investment in Dorset's cultural infrastructure through the provision of capital improvements to Dorset History Centre and a pan-Dorset public engagement programme.

1. Introduction and background

- 1.1 Dorset History Centre (DHC) is the home of the Joint Archives Service for Dorset Council and BCP Council. Its application *Past Lives, Future Proofed* to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) was submitted in November 2025 with a four-month assessment period. The London and South of England committee met on 5 March and a decision was taken to support the project's Development Phase with a grant of £603,000. This has been matched by £80,000 from the Joint Archive Service's (JAS) own funds – drawn partly from its service reserve and partly from its donations reserve – funds which had been deliberately ringfenced over a significant period for this purpose with the permission of the Joint Archives Board. Additional in-kind contributions through volunteer time have been included in the overall application's financial calculation.
- 1.2 The project represents a long-standing and acknowledged need on the part of DHC. The building was constructed in 1991 with an estimated 25 years of collections' expansion space, and it is now at 96% capacity. The project will provide additional accommodation for physical archives which still come into the service in significant quantities. Work on the project originally commenced in 2013 with an options appraisal and feasibility study. This culminated in an unsuccessful application to the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2017. A series of events (LGR, full-service review and new joint agreement with BCP, Covid and financial reviews) meant that it was some years before DHC was in a position to reapply to the NLHF. Dorset Council has pledged

£540,000 towards the project through its capital programme, contingent upon a successful Stage 2 application. The service now has the means to deliver the project but necessarily requires Cabinet approval to proceed given the size of the budget involved.

2. Project development and delivery

2.1 DHC has entered the 18-month Development Phase of the project which will result in a second stage application to NLHF intended for submission in November 2027. If successful, this in turn will result in a further grant of £3.8 million which will fund the majority of the Delivery Phase of the project and the capital improvements to Dorset History Centre. The project budget has both inflation and contingency allowances built into it as NLHF is very keen to ensure that projects do not exceed the grant originally request and thus seek additional budget from them as key funder.

2.2 The project has three key ambitions and will:

- Create a new two-storey repository block accommodating c. 22,000 boxes of physical archives adjacent and linked to the current building. This should provide at least 30 years of expansion space.
- Improve the public spaces including a new entrance and reception area;
- Deliver a major programme of public engagement focussing on collections and audiences, building partnerships and long-term collaboration.

3. Project personnel and responsibilities

3.1 During the Development Phase various additional staff and contractors will be employed in order to assist the core DHC team in testing and refining the project proposals and in preparing the Delivery Stage application. These are:

- Project Archivist (18 months) 1.0 fte
- Project Community Engagement Officer (18 months) 0.8 fte
- Design team (consultants) including project manager, architect, quantity surveyor, mechanical, structural and electrical engineers and a fire specialist.
- Evaluation consultant

3.2 The NLHF has also appointed two external project monitors whose role it is to support the project team, act as 'critical friends' and to report back to the NLHF to ensure that the project is delivering to specification, time and budget.

3.3 DHC is working closely with Dorset Council's Assets and Regeneration Service which is acting in the 'intelligent client' role to facilitate and support the design work and to ensure quality and value for money. It will also be important for example to plan for a period of closure of the DHC building whilst construction works are undertaken – and whether an alternative, temporary service model can be provided instead.

- 3.4 DHC staff will, along with Assets and Regeneration colleagues engage with the appointed consultants to ensure that the final design proposal which will inform the next application to NLHF is both visually and practically appropriate for the service as well as ensuring that it falls within the cost envelope available to the project.
- 3.5 The service will also be responsible for composing the second-stage application to NLHF and liaising with the Lottery officers throughout the process. In addition, DHC will need to raise the match fund requirement to ensure that the full budget for the project is in place before the commencement of the Delivery Phase in mid-2028. Two internal staff groups have been created to work on the repositories/staff areas of the building and the public spaces respectively. NLHF retrospectively funds projects in quarterly arrears so there will be regular requests made of it for costs incurred throughout the life of the project.
- 3.6 The Development Phase of the project will provide an opportunity to explore the costs, risks and outcomes proposed for the Delivery Phase including the volunteer input and digital outputs. It is important that the proposals outlined initially stand scrutiny and that the audiences we engage with view identified priorities in the same way as the service. Above all, the project must align with the NLHF's Investment Principles and deliver high-quality outcomes whilst embedding sustainable practices and long-term organisational health within DHC.

4. Project funding

- 4.1 There are two phases of the project and two separate but linked budgets:
- Development – cost £684,000 (fully funded)
 - Delivery – cost £4.6 million (subject to funding decisions all contingent upon a successful Stage 2 application to NLHF)
- 4.2 In terms of fundraising, the JAS has a significant but realistic target to meet in order to generate the full cash sum needed to complete the Delivery Phase of project. This is normal in projects such as this and NLHF expects the service to work to raise the balance of the funds. Project funding is detailed below:

Development Phase Funds (committed)		
Source	Amount	Status
NLHF (Development Phase grant)	£603,000	Confirmed
DHC service reserves	£80,000	Ringfenced
Sub-total	£683,000	
Delivery Phase Funds (committed in principle)		
Source	Amount	Status

NLHF (Delivery Phase grant)	£3,800,000	NLHF committee decision March 2028
Dorset Council	£540,000	Subject to NLHF successful Stage 2 bid
Dorset Council Community Infrastructure Levy	£50,000	As above
Dorset Archives Trust	£50,000	As above
Dorchester Town Council	£5,000	As above
Dorset Council Section 106	£45,000	As above
<i>Funds still to raise</i>	<i>£110,000</i>	<i>TBC</i>
Sub-total	£4,600,000	
Total	£5,283,000	

- 4.3 As can be seen, all the additional or ‘match’ funding is contingent upon a successful second stage application to NLHF – which is viewed by other bodies as the ‘gateway funder’. This means that there currently remains a gap of **c. £110,000** to bridge. DHC will seek support from a range of sources in order to ensure that full project funding is in place. We have consulted with the leaders of other recently delivered cultural capital projects to find out how they were able to meet the funding challenge and have benefitted from their advice and experience. Without in any way wishing to appear complacent or over-confident, we are optimistic that the service will be able to meet the full funding requirement before the Delivery Phase of the project begins. However, in the unlikely event that it should prove impossible for the service to raise the full match sum outstanding then the contribution from Dorset Council would be increased (as a maximum) from £540k to £650k.
- 4.4 There is in addition, an ‘in-kind’ contribution element which relates to volunteer input. This is calculated based on anticipated volunteer activity and the equivalent cash value to the service using a formula provided by NLHF. The value of the in-kind volunteer contribution will provide a notional additional £150,000 resourcing to the project.
- 4.5 The service will be working closely with its support charity the [Dorset Archives Trust](#). The latter can apply for funds that are not open to local authorities and in the case of personal giving, DAT is able to harvest Gift Aid. The service will be applying to a number of charitable trusts and foundations as well as approaching depositors and a wider range of stakeholders.
- 4.6 Based on the above calculations, it can be seen that this project (over the two phases) offers an approximately 1:9 return on investment for Dorset Council, although it should be noted that the council’s match fund contribution was an essential part of securing NLHF investment as it was seen by the latter as a sign of commitment and belief on the part of DC to the project and the county’s cultural infrastructure.
5. **Next steps**

- 5.1 In order to submit a high-quality application in November 2027, the DHC team will need to focus first and foremost on *Past Lives, Future Proofed* so that both the capital and engagement elements of the project have been well scoped with ample evidence of need and demand, alongside rigorous analysis of costs and risks. In this way, we hope to be able to move seamlessly into the Delivery Phase of the project in mid-2028 with a three-year plan of action.
- 5.2 The proposal will be discussed at the Property Asset Management Group on the 2nd July and Capital Strategy Asset Management Group on the 13th July for review.
- 5.3 If Cabinet approves the spending profile and schedule for this project, the team is ready to start work on the development of the second stage application. It is hoped that the service has made a compelling case for this endorsement.

1. Alternative options considered

There is no alternative model for delivering archive services currently under consideration.

2. Legal considerations

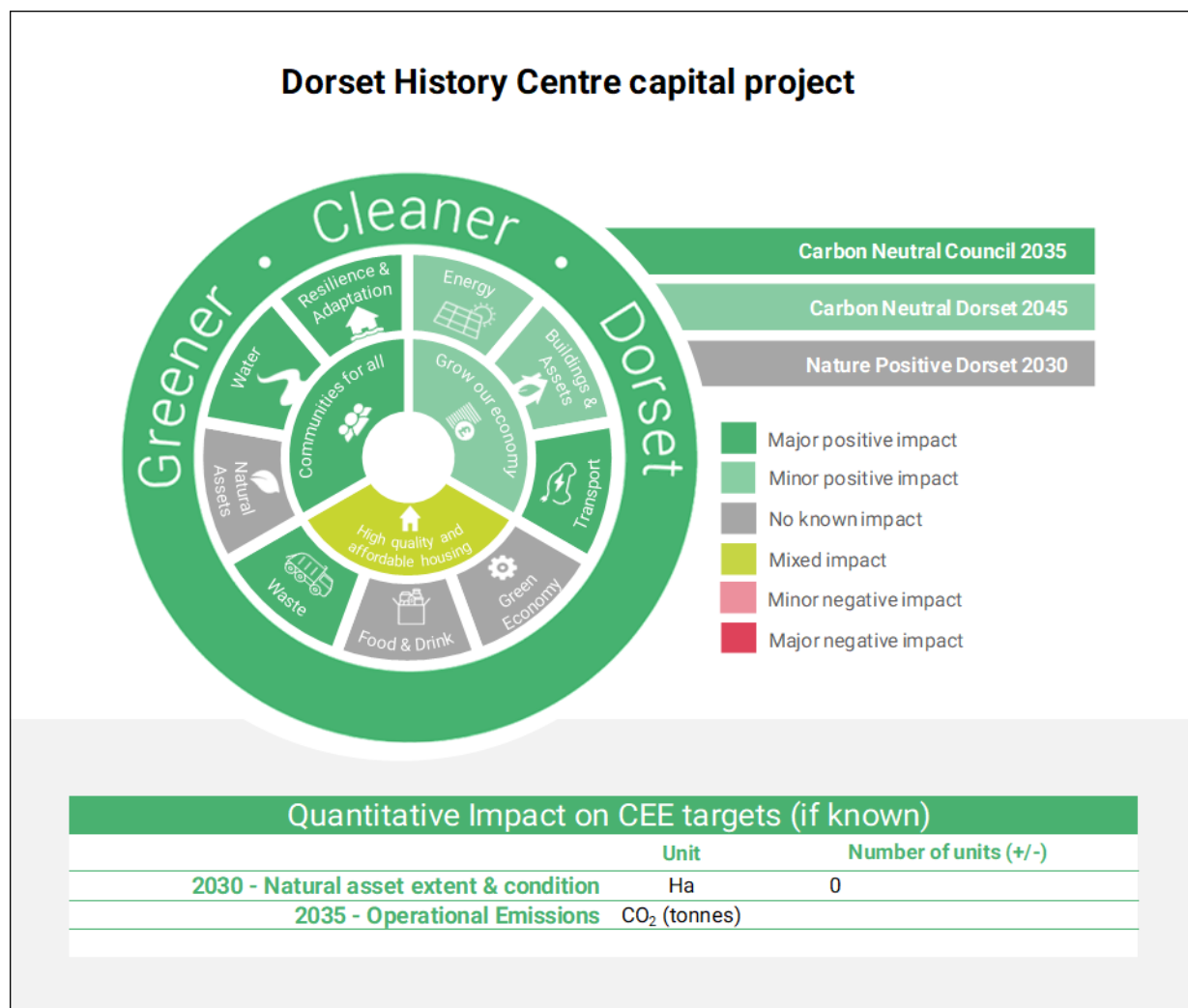
All work within this project will be undertaken in compliance with the applicable law, Contract Procedure Rules and relevant governance requirements.

3. Financial implications

All activities described in this report are covered by either the JAS revenue budget, capital resources, reserves or an externally sourced grant.

4. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

DHC has significantly improved its energy performance through a major project (2017-18) funded in part by Low Carbon Dorset to reduce consumption whilst ensuring the maintenance of high-quality environmental controls. This, combined with the generation of solar energy through PV panels on roof elevations has rendered the building highly energy efficient. Please see below for 'climate wheel' analysis of the project's environmental impact (where known).



ACCESSIBLE TABLE SHOWING IMPACTS

Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Strategy Commitments	Impact
Energy	minor positive impact
Buildings & Assets	minor positive impact
Transport	major positive impact
Green Economy	No known impact
Food & Drink	No known impact
Waste	major positive impact
Natural Assets & Ecology	No known impact
Water	major positive impact
Resilience and Adaptation	major positive impact

Corporate Plan Aims	Impact
Grow our economy	minor positive impact
High-quality and affordable housing	neutral
Communities for all	strongly supports it

TABLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations	Responses -will this be incorporated into your proposal? How? And if not, why not?
Energy	
Replace fossil fuel boilers with low carbon heating systems.	This was scheduled via AMP but is now not deemed a priority. A&R may seek to review this subject to budget availability - boilers are the originals fitted in 1991.
Find out energy use of any new build buildings that are being added to the Dorset Council carbon footprint, as this will affect our ability to hit our carbon reduction targets	Will be done as part of the design work - undertaken before 2nd stage submission to NLHF in November 2027.
Ensure new builds are fitted with low carbon heating systems	The project will seek to use latest and most energy-efficient plant possible.
Buildings & Assets	

Design the building to be zero carbon, running costs will be greatly reduced and retro fitting later will cost much more	Key principle of the project was always to be as energy and carbon efficient as possible. Passive preservation lies at the heart of the proposal with as little mechanical intervention as possible.
Transport	
No recommendations found for this category	
Green Economy	
No recommendations found for this category	
Food & Drink	
No recommendations found for this category	
Waste	
No recommendations found for this category	
Natural Assets & Ecology	
No recommendations found for this category	
Water	
No recommendations found for this category	
Resilience & Adaptation	
No recommendations found for this category	

5. Well-being and health implications

The JAS/DHC contributes to wellbeing outcomes for both councils and improving the quality of life for residents of BCP and Dorset Council areas and attracting visitors to the county lie at the heart of its work.

6. Other implications

None

7. Risk implications

HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Medium (due to pressure on archive accommodation – although mitigated by the recent NLHF decision).

8. Equalities

The JAS/DHC has completed a full EQIA. Areas for further consideration include working with younger people and with black and ethnic minority groups and religious

minorities. Improved digital provision will also assist in providing greater access to collections for people living at some distance from Dorchester.

9. **Appendices**

None

10. **Background papers**

Dorset History Centre Business Case

11. **Report sign-off**

This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Assurance and Governance (Monitoring Officer), the Director of Resources (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Cabinet Member(s).