



Archifau Gogledd Ddwyrain Cymru
North East Wales Archives

Creative Archives/ Archifau Creadigol Project Overview

November 2023

Unlocking potential and innovation

Creative Archives will build a new joint archive for North East Wales Archives (NEWA) next to Theatr Clwyd, a nationally important producing theatre. Our partnership with Theatr Clwyd will enable us to use our rich collections as a source for storytelling and performance to reach out to new audiences, transforming our service and influencing archive audience engagement practice across the UK. This is our big idea and the thing that we will become known for.

NEWA, formed in April 2020 when Denbighshire Archives (Ruthin) and Flintshire Record Office (Hawarden) came together to offer a joint service for the region, bringing together their nationally important archive collections. The aim is to establish a stronger, more resilient and sustainable archive service for the region. Currently operating across its existing two offices in Ruthin and Hawarden, the joint service has a rich archive of 5,000 collections, in both Welsh and English, that tell the stories of individuals, communities, families, estates, businesses, local government and churches over 900 years and the impact their lives and decisions had on local, regional and national history and identity.

NEWA's ambition to reach out and engage with new audiences is hampered by a lack of resources, expertise and having two buildings that are not fit for purpose. NEWA's current buildings are not fit for purpose. They both lack quality public spaces for learning, exhibitions and relaxing. Ruthin Gaol and Hawarden Old Rectory are full, which makes proactive collection difficult and most of the stores are not compliant with British Standards for storage of archives. There are no dedicated facilities for document reception, sorting, accessioning, cataloguing, cleaning or isolation. Hawarden Old Rectory is prone to leaks and Ruthin Gaol experiences flooding, with the most recent incident occurring in January 2021. This is placing the collections at risk.

Given the lack of storage, minimal opportunities for growth, escalating costs and building limitations, staying at Ruthin Gaol and Hawarden Old Rectory do not represent long-term and sustainable options for the NEWA. The huge potential for more and a wider range of people across the region to engage with its documentary history is difficult to realise within the current facilities. A move to a purpose-built, net carbon zero archive centre, provides NEWA with the best opportunity to look after the rich documentary heritage for North East Wales for generations to come and to put people at the heart of the service.

The investment from the National Lottery Heritage Fund will unlock the potential of our archive collections and enable us to seize the opportunities for collaborative working and reaching new audiences.

Our relationship with Theatr Clwyd has been growing in strength over the past two years. In 2019 Theatr Clwyd recreated the Mold Riots on the streets of Mold, inspired by the stories in our archive and delivered by 200 community participants. During 2021 we piloted four filmed monologues, based on characters in the collections and now showing on YouTube. During 2023 we worked with the Theatr's creative writing group and introduced them to archives and their hidden stories. These joint projects mean that both organisations have come to realise the power of the stories held in the collections and the power of drama to reach new audiences. Our partnership with Theatr Clwyd underpins our outline activity programme and we can utilise their skills, experience and networks to reach our priority audiences.

Our priority audiences have been identified as:

- Prisoners in HMP Berwyn
- LGBTQ+ groups
- Young people 14-25

- People with dementia
- People with poor mental health
- Families with children under 11 years
- Schools

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and low-income communities will be cross-cutting themes across all seven target audiences.

We have spoken with representatives from every single one of these target audience groups and developed ideas for collaborative working and using their expertise to upskill our staff and volunteers and co-create and deliver the activity programmes.

Our innovative way of collaborative working, which uses the power of stories to engage new audiences, is exemplified by our opening exhibition. Created with the prisoners from HMP Berwyn, the exhibition will use their lived experiences to research and retell the lives of patients from records in the North Wales Asylum collection.

Drama, music, dance and creative writing will be woven into all our activity programmes, as a tool to unlock the stories in the archive. We will work with Theatr Clwyd to film monologues, to tell stories about LGBTQ+ lived experience, to create intergenerational performances based on the stories in the collections, unlocking memories for people with dementia and creating a new drama to tour to schools in the region. We are committed to delivering all our programmes bilingually.

The design of our joint archive centre reflects our ambition to engage with audiences in new and different ways. A net carbon zero building, it contains learning spaces for creative activities, a digital lab and separate research rooms for quiet researchers and noisy explorers. Behind the scenes there will be a state-of-the-art conservation studio and collections handling areas and storage areas, all adhering to the PD5454 standard.

Beyond the new building, NEWA is committed to delivering its services across the region through its network of libraries and in specific locations, such as the former archive location at Ruthin Gaol and in Gladstone's Library in Hawarden, where people might feel that their service has been withdrawn.

Online access to the collections is critical to engaging with new audiences and taking the archives out beyond our walls. The Covid 19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of digital engagement. The project will see a programme of digitisation of collections online, development of the NEWA website, social media channels and other digital activities.

We recognise that this is a massive transformation for our staff and volunteers. We have built in change management training to support people through the change. A revised team structure supported by a training programme will allow for the activity plan to be delivered using internal resources. Realigning internal resources strengthens the sustainability of the programme. By working in collaboration, we will learn from delivery partners.

Additional funding sources will be explored throughout the project's duration.

Throughout the development and delivery phases of the project, Welsh language, culture and heritage will be at its heart. Our Welsh language collections will be used as part of the activity programme and the archive centre will have a Welsh name. Welsh language standards will be followed throughout. As a local authority, all translation costs are paid for via a corporate budget.

PROJECT CHANGES SINCE HERITAGE HORIZON FUND APPLICATION

Following our unsuccessful application for the Heritage Horizon Fund, we have had to reduce project costs somewhat, so that it fits within the new funding envelope. We have attempted to achieve this whilst maintaining the project's ambition.

The project cost has been reduced from £16.5 million to circa £12 million.

The building design has undergone some changes. The building has been through a thorough re-evaluation exercise that has scrutinised every aspect of the initial design. This has resulted in several changes, which are outlined in detail within the feasibility report (see supporting document). The environmental standard for the building has changed from passivhaus to net carbon zero. Whilst passivhaus would have been the optimum standard to aim for, a net carbon zero building provides an exceptionally high environmental standard whilst reducing capital costs; that said, because of the strict environmental controls applied to the repository it will be built to passivhaus standards but not accredited. Discussions with Theatr Clwyd have presented opportunities to utilise their excellent exhibition facilities rather than have our own, so this has been removed from the building design. A new shelving layout has been developed that significantly reduces floor space in the repository area. The building has also seen a reduction in some room sizes, such as the self-service area, search-room, staff areas, storage areas and digitisation space. The changes outlined have resulted in the building size reducing from 3000m² to 2100m².

The activity plan remains intact and maintains the project's ambition to engage with priority audiences. A Community Engagement Officer was employed in December 2022 and has been working on building relationships with delivery partners, consulting with stakeholders and piloting some activities. This work has helped to further inform the development of the outline activity plan. The costs associated with the activity plan and worked with delivery partners in order to reduce them. An example of where this has been achieved is our opening exhibition, which will now be located in Theatr Clwyd's exhibition area and supported by a digital exhibition. Student placement costs have been eliminated, as funding is available via the further education and higher education sector (to be explored further in the Development Phase). Apprenticeship costs have been removed, as these will be included as part of the community benefits element of the construction framework.

Another key change has been a shift to using the NEWA team to develop and deliver the activity plan rather than hiring costly consultants. It's felt that a skills analysis and a revised team structure supported by a suitable training and mentoring programme will enable the NEWA team to deliver the activities. Sufficient time away from normal duties will be provided to the NEWA team in order to support the transition; this will include reducing opening hours and re-prioritising tasks during this period. This approach will also place the team in a better position to deliver activities for the long-term rather than just for the project's duration.

We have also had to provide assurance to both local authorities that a new build on the site next to Theatr Clwyd remains the best option. A feasibility study was undertaken during 2023 that looked at several sites and considered retrofitting of existing building and new builds. The conclusion from this study was that a new build next to Theatr Clwyd remains the best option both from a cost perspective and the opportunities it offers for engagement work.

COVID 19

We have analysed the programme in the light of the recent pandemic and concluded that the project proposals are still relevant and deliverable and that COVID has not had and will not have a negative impact on the project. The pandemic has demonstrated the growing importance of online access to information and digital engagement. Digital represents a key enabler for the Creative Archives project. A Digital Strategy has been developed to provide a strategic direction for NEWA. The digital strategy initiates the process of reimagining what an archives service for North East Wales can be in a digital age and outlines the approach NEWA will take in utilising its digital capabilities in order to widen its scope and audience base.

Digital will be a dimension of all activities of NEWA, its building, its people, processes and systems. It will be integrated within all our thinking. When a new activity is initiated, NEWA will identify whether this activity is primarily a digital activity, how digital media and technology can support it, and how it can contribute to the digital ambition of NEWA. Furthermore, digital will be used to make NEWA's processes more efficient and sustainable.

We will reach out beyond North East Wales through our website, social media and online resources, including webinars and podcasts.

Shared learning

NEWA wants to be the lead body in the archives sector for creative engagement. It's important that throughout the project, lessons are learned from this innovative work programme and that these are shared across the sector. The Creative Archives project will ensure a thorough evaluation is undertaken, the results of which will be published.

NEWA will also ensure that throughout the duration of the project and beyond, the knowledge gained is shared via meetings, seminars and workshops. Articles will be written for online media outlets and trade periodicals. NEWA is a member of various regional and national archive bodies and there is a commitment to share learning within these arenas, so that other archive services and the heritage sector as a whole, can learn from the Creative Archives project.

Priority outcomes

Engaging with new and different audiences is a driver for Creative Archives and through our evaluation we will demonstrate how we have brought about positive changes to people, places and the heritage sector as a whole.

We know, for example, that our current users are older, white, middle class and well educated and through our proactive engagement programmes we will be able to quantify the change in profile. Through the emphasis on local stories we will measure increased interest in the heritage of the local area and pride in the history, Welsh identity and culture.

There will be a training programme underpinning the activity programme for staff, volunteers and community partners, including skills training and change management training to prepare and up-skill the staff for the transition.

Our activity programme and project work will provide opportunities for our priority audiences to gain skills, such as prisoners in HMP Berwyn gaining research skills; LGBTQ+ individuals, young people and children learning new storytelling and media skills;

Duke of Edinburgh award volunteers gaining guiding and leadership skills and teachers learning about using the archives to support their teaching.

Two of our priority audiences are people with dementia and those with poor mental health. Theatr Clwyd already works successfully with these groups and with expert organisations to deliver their programmes. We will work with Theatr Clwyd's knowledge to build on their programmes and add new dimensions to their work.

But we aim to embed wellbeing opportunities throughout our activity programme through, for example, our work with prisoners, our onsite and online volunteering programmes, drama workshops for young people and reminiscence work with LGBTQ+ groups.

Through our evaluation we will test the wellbeing impact of these specific programmes and the more general programmes, such as our onsite and online volunteering programmes, drama workshops and reminiscence work, using recognised wellbeing measures to assess the impact, testing whether people feel happier, more satisfied, less anxious and more connected to people around them and to the place they live.

A Community Engagement Officer was appointed during late 2022 to begin building relationships with delivery partners and piloting activities. A Community Officer role will be created during the development phase to continue with this work. The role will also play a key role in furthering this work with development and delivery of the activity plan. The Community Officer will be supported by a revised NEWA team structure that's better aligned to the new delivery model. NEWA will undergo a change management process so that the new ways of working and new attitudes are firmly rooted in the organisation. At the same time new volunteers will be recruited and new expert delivery partners identified, expanding the knowledge, capacity and capability of the organisation.

We will measure the increase in management and staff skills through appraisals and workshops while diversification of income will be reflected in a robust business plan.

During the Covid pandemic we have seen how important digital provision and engagement has been and our programmes to make the collections more accessible online, virtual volunteering, improving our website and social media will make our service more resilient and able to cope with shut-down of our onsite services.

Together with Theatr Clwyd, NEWA will be a focal point for local and regional community engagement and pride. More than that, through family, adult and schools' programmes and online access, we will take the archives out into those communities into libraries and community centres.

We will measure the impact of NEWA and its outreach on the community through online surveys, individual and group consultation, with local people and tourists recognising the positive contribution that NEWA makes to the local area. We will pay particular attention to the feedback we receive from Ruthin and Hawarden residents and be responsive to their opinion and comment.

Already a major destination for North Wales, Theatr Clwyd's refurbished building is due to open in 2026 with the proposed new archive centre soon after, thereby creating a new, vibrant hub for the region.

Thinking about NEWA alone, the AIM economic impact toolkit suggests that the project will generate over £200,000 in the local economy and create 18.5 direct and indirect jobs locally. Combined with the might of Theatr Clwyd, the new cultural hub will have a more significant impact on the local economy.

Sustainability

The long-term sustainability of the project is assured. The creation of a Community Officer job role supported by a revised team structure will help ensure that NEWA can continue with this exciting transformative work programme for the long-term. This work is further supported by commitment from both Denbighshire and Flintshire local authorities, which have both agreed to provide a significant financial contribution and also have the project incorporated into high level corporate strategies.

As with any project, there are risks associated with it. These are mainly focussed on delays and increasing costs associated with capital build projects. However, both local authorities have significant experience and expertise in delivering large-scale capital build projects, such as schools, regeneration programmes etc. Procurement frameworks will be utilised and a generous contingency fund has been allocated.

We are committed to environmental sustainability and the joint archive building will be designed to net carbon zero standards for building comfort which relies on good building orientation, well insulated fabric, a high level of airtightness and mechanical ventilation with heat recovery to create an environment from the outset that requires little energy. We will make conscious choices about the goods and services that we purchase, implement a recycling policy for staff and our visitors, and will re-purpose items where possible, rather than disposing of them.

Ecological mitigation features will be incorporated into the building, such as provision for bird boxes and bat boxes, and landscaped features such as retaining walls will provide refugia for invertebrates.

Planting schemes will be selected for their biodiversity value from Spring through to Autumn, as well as to provide year-round interest and colour. Scented plants will be included adjacent to pathways and seating areas.

In conclusion

The idea at the heart of Creative Archives is distinctive and innovative – using drama, dance and storytelling to animate the archive collections and reach out to new audiences.

Everyone we talk to is captivated by the concept and our partners and collaborators are keen and ready to go. This funding will help to unlock that opportunity and potential to create something wonderful that will become a trailblazer for the sector.