27th November 2014

RE: Budget consultation 2015-16 and the proposed closure of Newport Museum

Dear Cllr. Bright,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) in response to the current consultation on proposed Newport City Council budget cuts and particularly the future of Newport Museum.

The CBA is the national amenity society concerned with protection of the archaeological interest in heritage assets. We have a membership of 620 heritage organisations who, together with our thousands of members, represent national and local bodies encompassing state, local government, practitioner, academic, museum and voluntary sectors.

The CBA wishes to stress the value of the services the museum provides, support the present institution which has a positive reputation in region and further afield, and underscore our assessment of the importance of the institution for the continued curation of Newport’s rich heritage to both research audiences and the public in a suitable way.

There are over 70,000 objects in the museum’s collections, including important collections relating to the city’s Chartist heritage, and the internationally significant 15th Century Newport Ship. We are pleased that, thanks to the promise of Welsh Assembly funds, the work to stabilise the Ship will be able to continue from a new location. Subject to the continuation of public access during this period the CBA accept that the slightly less accessible location for the ship will be off-set by savings. However, we have concerns about the plans to close the Museum and Art Gallery.

In theory, the temporary closure of the Museum and Art Gallery presents a regrettable but not inherently unreasonable business case for the Council, considering its current financial position. However, the CBA does not believe that the information that has been presented puts forward this case in an acceptable way. The costs of re-establishing the museum, maintaining access for researchers to the collections in the interim, and operating the proposed temporary exhibitions have not be assessed. Without these calculations it is possible that the Council will not be able to afford to return to a state of a permanent operation for a very long time.
The loss of the museum as an important local cultural hub and tourist attraction for any great length of time would be of huge damage to the City and its people. The worst case scenario would be to accede to the indefinite closure of the museum now, without fully understanding how the proposals to re-open will be taken forward. We should note that while the museum is closed the collections will still need to be maintained. Save for the value generated from research on the collections during this time, the cost-benefit ratio from the collections while not on display to the public will be much lower than if the museum were to remain open.

We accept that the consultation indicates that a period of assessment of options is scheduled to take place in the coming months and that any decision would be subject to a further 12 week consultation. However, if the decision is taken now before these appraisals have taken place we are concerned that the Council will not be able to reverse the decision if these future appraisals show the move to be unviable. This could lead to the indefinite loss of the museum and a huge cultural loss for the city. We look forward to being able to contribute to these future discussions, and hope that no irreversible decision is made before that time.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

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