Dorchester's Shire Hall gains National Lottery



Dorchester's Shire Hall

The district council and LDCT have received a confirmed grant of £1.5m from the HLF for the Shire Hall project. The project will see the Grade I listed building transformed into a major visitor centre with high quality exhibitions and educational and training resources.

The project aims to renovate and conserve the historic building and to convert it into a visitor centre, bringing to life the cases which were heard between 1800 and 1955 when it was a functioning court and cells. The project will also explain how life in Dorset and the justice system has changed throughout the life of the building.

The Shire Hall was built between 1796-1800 and designed by architect Thomas Hardwick. It hosted the Crown Court and travelling Assize court, and was also the scene for the trial of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834. Half a century later, the author Thomas Hardy served there as a magistrate.

Commenting on the award, Cllr Anthony Alford, Leader of West Dorset District Council said: “We’re delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has given us this support. The Shire Hall is a truly unique building with a fascinating history that deserves to be opened up to residents and visitors to enjoy.”

Jon Murden, Chair of the London Dorchester Committee Trust, said: “We are extremely pleased to have secured this investment from the Heritage Lottery Fund for Dorchester’s historic Shire Hall. It will secure the future of this internationally significant building and make sure that the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs and the evolution of social justice in Dorset is interpreted and made accessible for generations of visitors to come.”

Nerys Watts, Head of HLF South West, said: “This project will not only secure the future of this historic building and bring it back into the heart of the community but also provide a fascinating insight into the history and development of Dorchester’s crime, law and justice systems. Thanks to money raised by National Lottery players, we are delighted to support this project.”

WDDC will use the grant to complete the detailed design of changes to the building and the permanent exhibition. Once the work is completed, WDDC will lease the building to LDCT who will operate it as a heritage attraction.

WDDC and LDCT aim to have the building open to the public by autumn 2017.

The project requires a total funding of £2.9m, which has so far been made up of £1.1m from WDDC and £100,000 from Dorset County Council (in addition to the £1.5m grant from the HLF). The remaining £200,000 is being sought from other organisations.

Notes to editors

About the Dorchester Shire Hall project

The district council were successful in a first-round application to HLF in 2013 and following that they and the London Dorchester Committee Trust produced a round 2 application in August 2014.

The second-round application included drawings of the scheme with planning and listed building consent, exhibition design, a business plan for the operation by London Dorchester Committee Trust and an activity plan.

The district council will lease the building to the London Dorchester Committee Trust once they have completed works done in agreement with them to change the building into a visitor centre around the themes of Justice and Workers’ rights, and local Dorset history.

The project has the support of a wide range of organisations including the Trade Union Congress, Dorset County Museum, Dorchester Arts and Thomas Hardy Society.

The new heritage centre will be run by the London Dorchester Committee Trust. The district council is also working with London Dorchester Committee Trust to move Dorchester’s award-winning Tourist Information Centre to Shire Hall.

About London Dorchester Committee Trust (LDCT)

LDCT is a charitable trust that has been set up for the purpose of providing a heritage centre in the Old Shire Hall, Dorchester.

Further information

For further information contact West Dorset District Council on 01305 252344 or communication@westdorset-weymouth.gov.uk.