

# NEW MILTON ADVERTISER & LYMINGTON TIMES

## **New Milton's Forest Arts Centre, the Red House Museum in Christchurch and the Rockbourne Roman Villa Fordingbridge are at risk as Hampshire Cultural Trust set for HCC funding cut of nearly 50%**

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A NEW Milton arts venue (Forest Arts) and a Christchurch museum (Red House) are at risk of closure as the charity which runs them (HCT) looks set to have its Hampshire County Council (HCC) funding slashed by nearly 50%.

Hampshire Cultural Trust, which runs New Milton's Forest Arts centre, the Red House Museum in Christchurch and Rockbourne Roman Villa in Fordingbridge, has warned venue closures are "inevitable" if the proposed cut is agreed by HCC.



**Forest Arts Centre in New Milton**

The Winchester-based charity, which operates 24 museums, galleries and arts centres, also manages, conserves and maintains Hampshire's Red House Museum collections, one of the largest and most significant regional collections of historic artefacts in the country.

Currently HCC is the charity's largest funder, contributing £2.5m per annum, but as part of its recent budget review, it is proposed this funding will be cut by nearly 50%.

Each year over 600,000 people visit trust venues and around 15,000 schoolchildren benefit from immersive education programmes. In addition, the charity's many targeted projects reach vulnerable groups such as those living with dementia, people suffering from mental health challenges and young people who are not in mainstream education.

Hampshire Cultural Trust chief executive Paul Sapwell said: "We understand that, like all local authorities, HCC is in an incredibly difficult position; they have a huge challenge to balance their budget.

"Although our funding accounts for just 0.1% of the council's overall budget, we fully accept that we have to play our part in taking a reduction. But we urge HCC not to view a disproportionate cut to the funding of culture in our county as a simple solution to immediate budget pressures."

Mr Sapwell continued: "Since we were established in 2014, we have already absorbed a real-time 50% reduction in local authority funding and have replaced that revenue through increased sales and fundraising activity, as well as substantially reducing our costs. Despite this, we will always be particularly vulnerable in a budget review of this kind, as museums, galleries and arts centres are not a statutory responsibility for councils."

Describing cultural attractions run by the trust as "essential to the identity and fabric of Hampshire", Mr Sapwell warned: "When times are tough, cultural experiences are so often seen as a 'nice-to-have', but stripping out what keeps people happy and healthy only saves money in the short term; it is well recognised that the pressure on health and social services only increases when services contributing to quality of life are cut.

"The value of culture to individuals, groups and communities really cannot be underestimated, and a cut of this scale has the potential to change the county's cultural landscape permanently. Although I can't confirm at this stage which venues will be affected, future venue closures across the county will be inevitable if a cut of this scale is agreed."

A spokesperson for HCC said: "For a long time now, we've been very open about the huge financial pressures facing the county council in the coming years – with an estimated budget shortfall of £132m by April 2025.

"Like many local authorities nationally our budgets are stretched to breaking point – because of high inflation, years of underfunding by central government and growing demand for core services like social care for vulnerable children and adults as more people need our help."

“With such major budget constraints, we are having to consider very carefully how we can close this funding gap in future and regrettably, some very tough decisions are now needed on what HCC can and cannot continue to do in future.



**The Red House Museum & Gardens in Christchurch (picture: Google)**

“We must look at all areas of our spending, including the range of both one-off funding and recurring grant funding we have provided over past years to support voluntary and not-for-profit organisations serving Hampshire communities – such as financial support awarded to Hampshire Cultural Trust.

“We are committed to working closely with the Trust on the details in relation to the proposals and possible implications should plans be agreed.

“We are already working closely with the trust to explore a more sustainable financial solution for them in future that would offer them more commercial freedom to generate their own income, independently from the county council.

“This option could also mean that the cultural trust receives less funding from the authority which would help towards us balancing our budgets and ensure available resources could be focused to support the most vulnerable people in Hampshire in the delivery of vital core services.”