

## WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

### Report by the Executive Director Educational Services

Corporate Cultural Sub-Committee: 9 December 2008

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**Subject: SINGER ARCHIVE – ESMÉE FAIRBAIRN FOUNDATION**

**1. Purpose:**

- 1.1** To advise the Corporate Cultural Sub Committee of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation funding awarded to West Dunbartonshire Council's Culture Section with regard researching and curating the WDC Singer Archive.

**2. Background:**

- 2.1** The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation is one of the largest independent grant-making foundations in the UK. It commits approximately £30 million annually towards a wide range of work. Its aims to improve the quality of life throughout the UK by funding the charitable activities of organisations that have the ideas and ability to achieve change for the better. Their primary interests are in the UK's cultural life, education and the natural environment. The majority of funding is channeled through its Main Fund, and small grants through time-limited, specialist funding Strands.
- 2.2** These new specialist funding strands include Museum & Heritage Collections; this strand makes grants of up to £100,000 and focuses on time-limited collections work including research, documentation and conservation which is outside the scope of an organisation's core resources. Proposals are prioritised where there exists the potential to share knowledge with other organisations through partnership working or dissemination or where it is difficult to guarantee tangible outcomes.
- 2.3** The Museum & Heritage Collections Strand complements schemes aimed to improve access to and understanding of collections by encouraging the research and development of ambitious exhibition programmes.
- 2.4** Clydebank Museum is the only Accredited museum in West Dunbartonshire and was established in 1980 through public partnership with Clydebank District Council. Originally, the museum was managed by volunteers before the District Council found funds to employ a curator. Many of the original community group members continue to work as volunteers at the museum.
- 2.5** Clydebank Museum sits within the Culture Section in Educational Services. Through its work, the museum promotes social and digital inclusion, caring for the heritage of the people of West Dunbartonshire by promoting its collections and encouraging community ownership of their history. The Section's Learning Programme reaches out to all sections of the community. During the last year, the museum learning activities have been well attended

by primary, secondary schools and colleges, groups with special educational needs, children excluded from mainstream education, pre-5s and the elderly.

- 2.6 At the museum's inception, the Singer Sewing Machine factory at Clydebank donated its technological and archive collections to the museum. These date from the first Singer sewing machine, manufactured in 1850, to sewing machines made in the late 1970's. They also donated examples of the munitions made in World War II. Advice from the International Sewing Machine Collectors Society (ISMACS) indicates that there are within the collection many extremely rare and several unique sewing machines, and collections of photographs.
- 2.7 The National Museums of Scotland (NMS) has advised in the past that the WDC Singer archive is potentially the largest collection of sewing machines (600+) and ephemera in Scotland, if not the United Kingdom. Following visits to the collection recent correspondence from the Senior Curator of Technology at NMS indicates that this collection is of regional and national significance. The Singer archive *"represents the dawn of globalization and the impact of international companies on a Scottish workforce"*, (See Appendix 2.)
- 2.8 It is felt that the Singer collection of sewing machines, photographs, munitions produced during World War II and archival material is of potential international importance due to the factory's impact on the rest of the world. It is also of fundamental importance to the region. Similarly the impact the factory and sewing machines had on the local female population as well as that of women globally was significant in its empowerment to break away from subsistence living.
- 2.9 Singer is a "live" issue with many local people still actively interested in the factory and its life. They offer an invaluable resource in terms of oral history and the operation of the factory until the time of its closure. However, they cannot provide adequate technical information about the machines. This is primarily due to the "conveyor belt" nature of the factory and the antiquity of some of the machines in the collection.

### **3. Main Issues**

- 3.1 Against this backdrop an application was made to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation in April 2008 to fund the employment of a specialist Science and Technology Curator to research and identify the sewing machines, the technical innovations which they represent, and their social impact.
- 3.2 The funding bid to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation is a strategic progression from the consolidation of our collections storage, conservation and documentation programmes. Staff knowledge and expertise to thoroughly investigate and research such as specialised collection is currently limited. Specialist skills are required to research, promote

accessibility and to fully appreciate how significant the collection is on a local, regional, national and international basis.

- 3.3** In November 2008 funding in full of £55,578 was awarded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to WDC Culture Section to employ a Science and Technology Curator for two years to research and document the Singer archive.
- 3.4** This curator will join the Culture Section and be managed by the Senior Officer, Museums. Culture Section officers have a proven track record in successful project management, and this two year project will follow SMART guidelines in its approach, timescales and outcomes.
- 3.5** The primary function of the Science and Technology Curator will be to provide access to the WDC Singer collection and to share this with the wider community. This will be done in a number of ways:
- *Research, both paper based and online*
  - *Research trips to other museums possessing large sewing machine collections to learn about their collections and the collection related knowledge of these museums and staff*
  - *Liaison with interest groups to link into and record their knowledge*
- 3.4** The project will record methodologies of machine identification in a usable one-stop guide which will be made available to the public. It is also planned to provide an online summary of this guide for easy accessibility. In addition the WDC collection of sewing machines, once identified, will be made available online with contextual information. These will be augmented by the Council's photograph and instruction book collections.
- 3.5** The final strand of the two year project is to research the social impact of the sewing machine, both in the UK and in the developing world. The Singer sewing machine was marketed as "The Great Civiliser" in the former colonies of the British Empire. These two avenues of social research may prove to be linked by increased financial stability for families and a move away from poverty. This project will to compare domestic and foreign experiences. It will also explore the impact upon the status of women through the introduction of the sewing machine as a labour saving device to enable more free time or the female's increased capacity for earning money.
- 3.6** It is anticipated that several museums, including the National Museums of Scotland, will work with the Culture Section to share information on specific models of sewing machine, collections and backgrounds to companies that produced them. Research trips to museums will be programmed and we will also invite interest groups such as ISMACS to engage with the project to add their expertise and to provide other networks of contacts.
- 3.7** There exist few aides to identifying sewing machines, their technical innovations or their impact on the domestic and international scene. This project represents a valuable piece of research and will aid many other

professionals as well as amateur enthusiasts. Through the use of diverse methods of dissemination online, in paper format, through exhibits etc. it is hoped that the project will reach a wide range of interested parties.

**3.8** This research project will benefit West Dunbartonshire Council's museums service and collections enormously. It would make accessible a collection of regional and national importance and would also open up the Council's collections to the whole museum community for further research. Results produced by the project will be made available to the wider community, both online and in written format and the Singer collection of sewing machines will be placed on the Council's online museum, Museum Without Walls.

**3.9** It is hoped that this project will support a future bid for the WDC Singer Archive/Collection to become a 'Recognised Collection of National Significance'. This in turn will raise the profile of the WDC museum collection nationally and internationally, and open doors to new funding opportunities for the museum service in West Dunbartonshire.

#### **4. Personnel Issues**

**4.1** There are no personnel issues.

#### **5. Financial Implications**

**5.1** The proposals within this report amount to £71,178, £55,578 of which will be funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The remaining £15,600 will be provided as funding 'in kind' by WDC Culture Section, representing Best Value to the council. A breakdown of the proposed expenditure is shown within the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation application attached to this report as Appendix 1.

#### **6. Risk Assessment**

**6.1** There is no increased risk to the Council associated with the contents of this report.

#### **7. Conclusions**

**7.1** This paper informs the Sub-committee of the recent Esmée Fairbairn Foundation funding award to WDC, to fund the employment of a Science and Technology Curator for a period of two years. It indicates the project background, aims and benefits linked to the strategic aims of the WDC Cultural Strategy:

- a) To conserve, interpret and celebrate our culture and heritage.
- b) To promote West Dunbartonshire's cultural identity locally, nationally and internationally.
- c) To increase access and participation in cultural activity for all citizens.

- d) To increase funding and investment in culture.

## **8. Recommendations**

**8.1** The Corporate Cultural Sub Committee is invited to:

- a). **Note the content of this paper and the aims and objectives of the WDC Singer Archive Project.**

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**Executive Director Educational Services**  
**Date:**

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**Appendix 1** Esmée Fairbairn Foundation Application  
**Appendix 2** Letter from National Museum of Scotland relating to WDC Singer Collection.

**Wards Affected:** All Council Wards are affected