

Speech for Cabinet on Fashion Museum Bath 20/5/25

Tonight, I am wearing a different hat, as Trustee of Fashion Museum Bath.

I was appointed because the Fashion Museum Foundation needed a B&NES Councillor, and my previous career as fundraiser for museums in London and Oxford is relevant and I hope useful.

Over the years, the Museum of Costume's visitor numbers dwindled, with limited display changes, little local engagement, and poor storage conditions. So, when the National Trust decided to take back the Assembly Rooms, it created an opportunity to look afresh at the collection and how it could be better displayed. It is an internationally significant collection of 100,000 objects, telling the history of British clothes and fashion for the past 500 years. Fortuitously the Old Post Office became available around the same time. So, the Fashion Museum Bath, at the heart of the new Milsom Quarter, became a real possibility.

B&NES should take credit for its ambition, imagination, and financial backing of this project. WECA deserves praise for the generous grant to buy the Old Post Office. Both gave confidence to the National Lottery Heritage Fund to support the project.

NLHF have granted £768k for the first Development phase: taking the project to RIBA Stage 2 and developing business, engagement and fundraising plans. Whilst this doesn't absolutely guarantee that they will grant the full Delivery funding (£7.2m), the likelihood is high, if the plans proceed satisfactorily. In fact, Fashion Museum Bath is more advanced than necessary at this point. Our experienced team are working at pace to submit the Detailed Designs in March 2026.

The Fashion Museum Bath will have international significance as it speaks to issues of sustainability, business and design. It will attract thousands of visitors as well as residents. Importantly, it will appeal to young people in B&NES, particularly teenagers, who love clothes and fashion. It will offer inclusive opportunities for creative skills training for those who may not typically visit museums. B&NES already supports young people at risk, or not in education or training. The Fashion Museum can offer them new opportunities. The Arts Council has granted £20k to help digitise the collection and make it more accessible online, with young people aged 16-24 involved. Over the summer, the engagement team will run consultation activities, including "Fashion Unpacked", a mini museum in a converted library van, which will showcase objects and tour the wider reaches of North East Somerset - taking the museum to the people.

The architects and designers are progressing well. B&NES has given pre-application advice, and a planning consultant appointed to ensure the process runs smoothly and to time. Stakeholder consultation, including Historic England, has been positive. The aim is to submit for planning permission early next year, and to launch in 2030.

The scheme is very exciting with a new pedestrian area outside, a lively façade with changing visuals and displays, an internal garden oasis, multiple galleries, a new learning space and a café.

There is a clear fundraising plan, with approaches underway to potential advocates, donors, companies and funders. The backing of B&NES, WECA and the NHLF makes securing the remaining funds far more likely.

This is a fantastic opportunity to have a world-class new museum in Bath which will provide wonderful opportunities for engagement and enrichment for our residents, particularly young people. I am so proud to be part of it and I hope you are too.