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# Museums for the many

Standards for Museums and Galleries to use when developing access policies



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## Section 1: Introduction

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- 1.1 A draft of these standards was first published for comments as part of a review of access to museums and galleries which began in the summer of 1997 and was later subsumed into the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) Spending Review. In reviewing access, DCMS has examined admission charges at the national museums and galleries which it funds, as well as the wider issue of access to all museums and galleries and their collections.
- 1.2 Last summer, Chris Smith, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, announced that all of the currently-charging national museums and galleries funded by DCMS had been allocated extra funds to allow free admission for children from spring this year and for pensioners from April 2000. This programme will be taken further in 2001-02. Extra funds have also been found to ensure that the currently non-charging national museums will be able to remain free.
- 1.3 Since then, the Department's two non-nationals which charge – the Museum of London and the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester – have also been granted funds for free admission for children.
- 1.4 However, access involves more than just tackling the issue of charging. Museums and galleries provide an astonishingly rich resource. They document and illuminate the life of past civilisations; the great artistic, cultural, scientific and technological achievements of humanity; the natural world we inhabit; and the lives, customs, beliefs and artistic achievements of other cultures. Museums and galleries are well positioned to provide fascination, pleasure and opportunities for learning for the whole community. This is why offering the widest access to museums and galleries is so important and why we are setting out minimum standards to be used when developing access policies.

## Section 2: Response to the Consultation

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- 2.1 DCMS had a good response to the consultation paper from national and regional museums and galleries, museums and arts organisations, and members of the public. Virtually all respondents welcomed the idea of access standards and strongly endorsed the importance of widening access to museums and galleries and their collections.

## Section 3: What's happening now

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- 3.1 Of course, much good work is already under way. Many museums have innovative access programmes and this document includes a number of examples of best practice. In addition, the Museums & Galleries Commission is carrying out research into who visits museums, and has provided guidance on the development of new audiences and how museums might attract a more culturally diverse audience. The Heritage Lottery Fund's £7 million Museums and Galleries Access Fund is supporting innovative projects. We also look forward to the Museum Association's forthcoming detailed guidelines on access.

## Section 4: Which Museums are affected by these standards?

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- 4.1 These standards seek to encourage all museums to offer wide access. However, in the first instance they are aimed primarily at all the museums and galleries directly funded by DCMS. They have been asked to set targets for access in their new 3-year funding agreements with the Department. All museums with designated collections are also being asked to consider this lead.
- 4.2 The Museums & Galleries Commission is also considering how these standards can become a requirement of Registration as part of their reformulation of the scheme over the next few years. It will be a priority for the new Museums, Libraries and Archives Council to take this work forward.

## Section 5: Context in which access policies are set

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- 5.1 It is of course understood that access is not only for the present but also for future generations, and that programmes have to be balanced against the conservation needs of the collection and the buildings within which they are housed. Conservation, care and access should always go together as balanced priorities.
- 5.2 Also, museums have very different characteristics (in terms of collections, buildings and finance) which require different approaches in order to maximise access. It is for individual museums and their governing bodies to frame their strategies in ways that are realistic for them.

## Section 6: Main access principles

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- 6.1 DCMS considers that the underlying objective for all museums and galleries should be to strive to offer the widest possible access to their collections and to the knowledge and expertise of their staff.
- 6.2 This requires a strong commitment from all the stakeholders in a museum, including trustees, elected members, staff and funders.
- 6.3 It also requires a focus on removing barriers to access which can be:
- **physical and sensory** (eg. affecting people with disabilities, older people and those with responsibility for children in push-chairs),
  - **intellectual** (eg. through inadequate display and interpretation of collections),
  - **cultural** (eg with collections, exhibitions and events failing to engage people from different cultural backgrounds),
  - **attitudinal** (eg. caused by museums not making all of their visitors feel welcomed and valued), and
  - **financial** (eg. admission charges, the cost of transport to and from museums, and the costs of catering and merchandising).
- 6.4 In view of this, museums and galleries should:
- publish in their Forward Plans strategies for promoting access,
  - publish their access and service standards,
  - carry out research about their visitors and users (and about those that don't visit or use the museum at present) using means appropriate to the size of the institution, and monitor the effect of access initiatives by establishing targets and performance indicators based wherever possible on both quantitative and qualitative measures,
  - review regularly the pattern and number of opening hours and set them to encourage a high number and broad range of visitors, and
  - demonstrate, where charges for admission to the core collection or temporary exhibitions are used, that the costs and benefits have been fully assessed and that the pricing structure reflects the overall objectives of the organisation and minimises any adverse impact on potential visitors.
- 6.5 The museums and galleries funded by DCMS are required to publish in their three-year Funding Agreements key access targets, including visitor numbers and other measures which indicate how they are widening access to a broad cross-section of the public for example by age, social class and ethnicity.

## Section 7: Strategies for improving access

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### Targeting diverse audiences

- 7.1 Audience development strategies should be wide ranging, including:
- the imaginative interpretation of collections – through high quality permanent displays and temporary exhibitions – in a way appropriate to a full range of audiences,
  - provision of educational opportunities to address life-long learning as well as formal education,
  - the design and layout of facilities to minimise physical/sensory barriers to access,
  - the communication of staff's knowledge about the collection,
  - events and activities (both directly related to the collection – eg talks, lectures, hands-on demonstrations, workshops, 'meet the artist/craftsperson/scientist' sessions etc – and those which might be described as more general entertainment – eg concerts, drama and dance etc),
  - ways of taking the collection and expertise out into the wider world (outreach activities, loans, touring exhibitions, publications, Internet, multi-media and TV coverage),
  - providing appropriate means of access to reserve collections and stored items for the general public as well as scholars,
  - working with other people and organisations who have experience of:
    - building audiences in the cultural sector (such as libraries, theatres and the creative industries) or,
    - dealing with groups currently under-represented amongst a museum's visitors (such as those associated with the social services, prison and probation officers, youth services and the caring charities),
  - publicity and promotion strategies, and
  - staff development.

### Meeting Audience Needs

- 7.2 Museums and galleries should set their opening hours in response to local conditions and the available resources. However, in doing so they should ensure that the pattern of opening hours is determined in such a way that museums and their collections are genuinely accessible to the vast majority of the population.
- 7.3 While we accept that charging is regarded by some as a barrier to access, some museums have to charge and the income raised can be used to enhance the quality of the experience through longer opening hours and better displays. However, all museums which charge should have a clear strategy for attracting people on low incomes.

- 7.4 All museums which charge for admission should offer concessions. While we do not think that a standard group can be defined, museums should give consideration to the following groups:
- school-age children,
  - students,
  - unemployed,
  - older people,
  - people with disabilities (and their carers/enablers), and
  - (particularly for local museums) local residents.
- 7.5 We also recommend the use of single-visit family tickets, season tickets, combined tickets for different museums, and periods of the day or week when admission is free to everyone.
- 7.6 Museums should also ensure that their shops and cafes sell items which those on low incomes can afford.

### Setting Service Standards

- 7.7 Museums should offer the best possible service for visitors/other users and should publish their access and service standards. These might include:
- targets for visitor figures,
  - targets for increasing the proportion of visitors from groups under-represented in museums and galleries, for example by age, social class and ethnicity,
  - number of events/activities for particular groups,
  - facilities for people with disabilities,
  - availability of information in languages other than English,
  - availability of electronic access to collections,
  - arrangements for the provision of expert advice,
  - arrangements for access to parts of the collections not on display,
  - correspondence turnaround, and
  - visitor satisfaction figures.
- 7.7 Museums and galleries which have been awarded the Charter Mark will already be displaying their service standards, and others are encouraged to pursue accreditation.

## Section 8: Museums for the many: examples of good practice

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Good access practice is found in all parts of the museums and galleries community and right across the country. This annex sketches out a few examples of museums and galleries which are particularly good at engaging with new audiences, but it does not seek to be exhaustive and further detailed case studies are given in the MGC's 'Building Bridges' publication.

The exhibitions, projects and approaches offered embody many of the audience development strategies listed above. Indeed, what is apparent from these examples is that individual techniques do not work in isolation: there is no point in carrying out audience research without a will from all stakeholders to make changes, or to embark on marketing to under-represented groups without ensuring that they are made welcome when they visit and that collections are displayed and interpreted in a way that is meaningful to them. It is also clear that work on widening access is 'never done': engaging a wide audience has to be a long-term commitment for all museums and galleries.

### **'A Respectable Trade? Bristol and Transatlantic Slavery Exhibition': Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery**

Bristol is a multicultural city with diverse ethnic groups making up 6% of the city's population. The biggest group, people of African Caribbean descent, have been especially low in the City Museum and Art Gallery's visitor figure numbers. Non-user surveys from this group were often accompanied by statements on the lines of the museum not being relevant to African-Caribbean culture and that Bristol as a City did not acknowledge its trading roots with the Caribbean and Africa.

Over the last 3 years the museum service has fostered consultation with the black community. A group made up of councillors, museum officers and members of the black community formed the 'Bristol Slave Trade Action Group' which was set up specifically to look at ways of acknowledging Bristol's part in the transatlantic slave trade. Consultative meetings on a number of small scale projects (a booklet on Bristol and Slavery, a small display in the Georgian House Museum linking the house's builder to sugar plantations in the Caribbean, and a town trail round forty sites linked to the slave trade) developed into wider, more committed focus groups working on the transatlantic slavery exhibition.

Public meetings, familiarisation sessions in the museum explaining how an exhibition is put together, focus groups set up to look at not only the content of the exhibition but also the use of language, as well as a series of add-on displays of relevance to young people and families, all paved the way to a developing confidence in the museum by the African Caribbean community.

Museum staff's commitment to taking note of and acting on advice from the community consultations were an essential part of gaining credibility with this group. In total about 300 people outside the museum have played a part in forming the exhibition and its programme of activities.

To bring the exhibition's content up to date three smaller displays on present day themes relevant to the black community have been developed with the museum's outreach section. An ancillary programme has been developed that includes free weekend and lunchtime talks and workshops, children's and family activities around the theme of the exhibition celebrating African and Caribbean culture. Extensive advertising in the black press, a widely distributed free guide and a free teachers pack all form part of the museum's commitment to bring the project to as wide an audience as possible in the exhibition's six month run.

Bristol and Transatlantic Slavery has enabled the museum to pilot new ways of delivering a more inclusive service. It also provides a working model for a more permanent social history of the city which is to be developed in the planned Museum of Bristol.

### **'Art Icebreaker': Dulwich Picture Gallery's outreach project**

Dulwich Picture Gallery has built up a reputation for excellence in education for every strata of society over the last fifteen years. 15,000 adults and children received face to face teaching both in the Gallery and by outreach in 1998.

The Gallery is currently closed for major refurbishment until May 2000, but is keeping its education work alive through its 'Art Icebreaker' outreach project funded by a £67,800 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund's Museums and Galleries Access Fund (with partnership funding from BT through its community partnership programme).

Adults and children will be engaged in mixed media practical art courses or literacy-related sessions based on the Gallery's old masters. The target audience will be new and radical, including some who have never visited an art gallery and would be unlikely ever to do so. Regular sessions will take place in schools and at centres for the homeless, for those with addictions and in detox centres, a psychiatric unit, a hospice, an educational centre for women and young girls, centres for the elderly and the disabled, and at Wandsworth High Security Prison.

### **'Dialogue in the Dark' at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester**

The sensory exhibition 'Dialogue in the Dark' was held at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester between September 1997 and January 1998, and sponsored by BT. It was also on show at the South Bank Centre in 1995. The exhibition offered visitors the opportunity to experience the world without sight. Visually impaired guides led visitors in small groups through completely darkened simulations of everyday locations – a living room, kitchen, street, park and pub. At the end of their tour, the dialogue continued as visitors had a chance to discuss the experience with their guide and other group members.

Henshaw's Society for the Blind worked in partnership with the Museum. As they provide direct and relevant services for people with visual impairments, the exhibition was also able to demonstrate what support, services and opportunities are available to people who are blind and partially sighted. Henshaw's also provided advice to the Museum in recruiting the visually impaired people who worked as guides. This paid employment gave the guides real work experience and provided the opportunity for them to work with the public in a direct and powerful way.

Dialogue in the Dark avoided traditional ways of conveying messages about visual impairment and heightened personal perception and awareness through experience. By actually encountering some of the difficulties faced by visually impaired people, the installation put the needs of this sector of the population on the agenda. It had a profound effect on all who experienced it. Comments from the visitors book talk unanimously about feeling moved and having perceptions changed.

### **Events and activities at the Galleries of Justice, Nottingham**

The Galleries of Justice is the UK's only museum of law. As such it is ideally placed to work within non-traditional audience groups on tackling issues of social need. As an Independent Museum with no core revenue grants, it still has to make a living and therefore it has divided charging activities and free outreach work into 3 separate categories – mainstream, diversionary and bursary supported.

'Mainstream' covers a programme of curriculum-linked programmes such as *Science detectives*, *Victorian Bobbies*, *Wash and Learn the Victorian Way*, and the extensive programme of Mock trials. These are delivered with a charge per pupil to the school.

'Diversionary' encompasses the museum's work with young people at risk of offending. This programme has been fully funded from grants and sponsorship over the last three years and is designed specifically to change young people's perception of their community, their responsibilities within that community and to improve their aspirations and self-confidence whilst challenging offending behaviour. A 10-week programme of education and activity resulting in a video production forms the basis of the project. Of the 84 young people that have taken part, only two have remained under the scrutiny of the local police.

'Bursary supported' allows a school with high proportions of children taking free school meals access to the Galleries of Justice facilities. Bursaries are funded by local and national businesses to tackle issues, which are in line with the companies' individual areas of charitable giving. For example Boots Company PLC supports a bursary for schools to work on an Equal Opportunities Mock Trial, the Institute of Legal Executive support a programme related to Citizenship and other businesses support programmes on drugs awareness and anti-bullying. A bursary covers a percentage or all of the costs relating to the visit, including admission, transport and development of resources, in return for corporate recognition in the Education leaflet.

### **Sunday Opening in Oxford**

The Oxford University Museum of Natural History is, like many university museums, an institution in transition. From a traditional focus on research and teaching, the Oxford University Museum is attempting rapidly to broaden its audience with a policy of wider public access. Thereby, not only will the public have an opportunity to discover and share the extraordinary wealth of the Museum's collections (more than 4 million specimens), the University as a whole will be more open and accessible to the local and national community.

Admission to the Museum has always been free of charge but the hours have been limited. In February 1999 the Museum decided to open its doors on Sundays and the response has been a 26% increase in attendance. The costs of adding a day's opening are considerable and will have to be subsidized for a year or more until they can be offset by voluntary contributions and gift shop income. However, the extremely positive response, particularly through making the Museum accessible to family visitors from the local region, and a favourable coverage in the local press, make the experiment a success. The Museum expects an even stronger increase in visitor number during the summer, tourist, season.

While university museums have unusual resources to offer visitors, the public comes to a university museum with a special set of expectations. University museums therefore face two parallel challenges and opportunities: to make themselves more accessible and to offer a unique experience. Sunday opening is an important beginning but only part of a strategy for changing the public face of a research museum.

### **Science Nights at the Science Museum**

For several years the Science Museum has offered, on a monthly basis, its highly popular Science Night programme. These 'sleepovers', for around 450 'campers' each time, provide an exciting, enjoyable and educational experience in the Museum outside normal opening hours. They also offer one of the cheapest (if slightly uncomfortable) night's accommodation in central London! Science Night programmes include a variety of workshop activities, demonstrations, gallery visits and museum trails, designed to make science and technology interesting and accessible to the audience.

Most Science Nights are offered for children aged 8 to 11, and bursary funds have enabled subsidised provision to be offered for children with special educational needs or from social priority areas. Special Science Nights have also been offered for adult women, most recently in a series sponsored by the Medical Research Council, and particularly aimed at those who feel they missed out on science earlier in their lives and would now like to establish contact with it in an informal way.

### **Tate Gallery of Modern Art: building audiences before the new gallery opens**

In advance of the opening of the new Tate Gallery of Modern Art in May 2000, the Tate is playing an active role in the regeneration of Southwark by developing strong roots in the local area. The Tate Gallery of Modern Art has become a catalyst to trigger renewal and regeneration in the Bankside area and is making a vital contribution to the educational, economic, cultural and social life of the area.

The commitment to be an active member of the wider community has led to the establishment of a wide range of collaborations and partnerships that create the foundations for audience development and increased accessibility. The Tate Gallery of Modern Art is setting out to redefine in a local context the traditional role of a national and international museum. It is also opening up previously closed avenues and involving the community in the creation of the new gallery that will function on a local, regional, national and international level.

## Community exhibition programmes at Tyne and Wear Museums

Tyne and Wear Museums (TWM) is a large urban museums service, managing ten museums spread across five district and city councils in the North East. It serves an area of high unemployment and poor social and economic indicators, but has always had a clear commitment to try to reflect and involve the whole community in its exhibitions and activities.

Art galleries in particular have always had problems in motivating potential audiences to visit. For a variety of reasons people think galleries are too imposing, or that art has little or no relevance to their lives, is elitist, or simply boring.

Through various initiatives, Tyne and Wear Museums are continually trying to make their galleries as accessible as possible to as many audiences as possible, by showing that art can be interesting and relevant to many people. They have also encouraged the display of works from the collections which may not necessarily be famous or highly regarded, but instead have been chosen by members of the public simply because they like them or because they arouse certain emotions or memories.

Since 1993 several Tyne and Wear museums and galleries have shown community exhibitions chosen and curated by local people. Five main aims underpin these projects:

- to give people greater confidence in their own ability to assess and to appreciate art,
- to provide wider access to the gallery collections and a better understanding of how a gallery works,
- to make visitors aware that art can be interpreted in a variety of different ways and that there is no one right answer,
- to create an enjoyable and stimulating experience for both participants and gallery visitors, and
- to focus particularly on people with disabilities and disadvantaged groups as a way of encouraging confidence and self-esteem.

A wide variety of groups and individuals have been involved with these exhibitions, including 4-year olds from a nursery school, staff from a Newcastle hospital, men from two local bail hostels in Sunderland and Gateshead run by the Probation service, children with hearing-impairments from Sunderland, teenagers from the Meadowell Estate in North Tyneside, employees from local companies and a group of Asian young people.

They select their own choice of work from the stores, write the label text, plan the layout of the exhibition and sometimes help with the hanging. The format is very flexible and varies considerably depending on the people involved. Sometimes the exhibitions have a theme. Alternatively, the exhibitions include a mixture of paintings, prints, pottery and sculpture. The labels reflect those personal choices and it is noticeable that other visitors often spend more time reading them than the 'traditional' captions elsewhere in the galleries.

Like many successful projects in Tyne and Wear Museums these exhibitions have benefited from the close working relationship between education, curatorial, attendant and other staff in museums as well as the partnerships with local communities.

The support of curatorial staff in opening up the collections and galleries, and talking about the paintings, exhibition practice and conservation to non-traditional users has been important to the success of the exhibitions, and the responses of the guest curators have encouraged a better dialogue and understanding on both sides. The project has reached new audiences, widened access and built up community support for the museums and galleries concerned.

### **Victoria & Albert Museum's Shamiana project**

The V&A's 'Shamiana: the Mughal Tent' is a unique project which was conceived by the late Shireen Akbar – the Museum's first Paul Hamlyn South East Asian Arts Education Officer – to encourage women and children of South-East Asian origin in Britain to explore their cultural heritage through making art. It proved to be a model for how to make the Museum's decorative art collections relevant to the lives and aspirations of a minority community which does not normally visit museums.

The Shamiana project encouraged groups of women from the Asian community to use the V&A's extensive Indian collections as inspiration for the creation of brilliantly coloured hand-made textile panels. These use a traditional form, but express contemporary themes – the cultural legacy of the Indian sub-continent, the experiences of migrants and immigrants, and sense of identity in a multi-cultural society.

It began in Tower Hamlets in 1992 and led to a major exhibition at the Museum in summer 1997 as part of the V&A's contribution to the celebration of 50 years of independence of India and Pakistan. This exhibition, broadened to include decorative panels from many parts of the world, is now on display at venues in the UK prior to an international tour. The V&A is currently developing plans for a web-based Mughal Tent that will enable the project to continue and grow.

### **'First Impressions' at Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Museum**

Access is the core objective at Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Museums. It directs all areas from curatorial practice to marketing. This requires the collections and exhibitions to be meaningfully interpreted for the widest possible audience, in ways that reach across to people whatever their sensory abilities or disabilities, educational background, or learning style.

They have a 'First Impressions' policy for family audiences who are newcomers to the fine arts. Over 60% of exhibitions are targeted at these visitors, with the remaining 40% aimed at developing understanding for those who are 'art experienced'.

To engage the audience, a large proportion of exhibitions are supported by additional brief texts and accompanied by activities such as object and costume handling. All text is produced in large print, and most exhibitions have music or audio information as well. The 'Ways of Seeing' gallery is aimed at families and contains interactive computers exploring key ideas and issues in the making of paintings.

The Art Gallery has tactile plans, a pre-visit guide and pack for visitors who are visually impaired, 3-dimensional interpretation of some paintings and a story telling audio guide to the Victorian collection. These resulted from disability audits, research and evaluation.

They are further developing multi-sensory methods in the planned re-interpretation of the permanent collections using audience research, educational research for life-long learning, and audience consultation in the development process. Key audiences will be family groups especially including people with disabilities, first comers to art, and Wolverhampton's Indian and Afro-Caribbean communities.