

Minutes of the Collaborative Working Group Meeting 3rd May 2006, MLA, Victoria House

Attendees

Sue Wilkinson – Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
John Millard – *on behalf* of David Fleming, National Museums Directors' Conference
Mark Taylor – Museums Association
Alec Coles – Renaissance Hub Museums Representative
Nichola Johnson – University Museums Group
Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton – Arts Council England

Paul Kirkman – Head of Museums, Libraries and Cultural Property Division (MLCPD) at DCMS (Chair)
Paul Barnes- Head of the MLA Sponsorship and Regional Museums Team within MLCPD
Keith Nichol- Head of the Museums Education Team within MLCPD
Ian Jenkins – MLA Sponsorship and Regional Museums Team
Gemma Gaines – Museums Education Team

Independent observers

Saira Law – Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
Olivia Morris- The National Trust

Apologies for absence: David Fleming (National Museum Directors' Conference) Chris White (Local Government Association) and Bill Ferris (Association of Independent Museums).

Minutes of the last meeting

1. The minutes of the last meeting were agreed, subject to four minor changes. It was agreed to put more contextual information about the minutes and the status of the group on the DCMS web-site, but not the working papers themselves.

Discussion Paper: Museums and Galleries and Learning

2. The Group discussed a working paper entitled '*Museums & Galleries and Learning*' to explore the different types of learning taking place in museums.

3. In opening the discussion, it was put forward that it was difficult to go into a museum without some sort of learning taking place, but it was

difficult to assess this in terms of public value. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) remained key to the development of a Museums Education strategy that promoted all forms of educational and learning encounters with museums, including both on-site and outreach work. There had been progress over the past 5 years, including: large scale evaluations of the delivery of the education strand of the Renaissance Programme for the leading regional museum services (*What did you learn at the museum today?*) and the development of the *Inspiring Learning for All* framework (ILFA) and the *Generic Learning Outcomes* (GLOs) that cover the broader spectrum of learning. While such work, and other research, had been widely welcomed, there was still a need to mainstream it throughout the sector, perhaps via advocacy in a national strategy. The development of the Museum Development Officer (MDO) network to include learning could also assist with embedding best practice, particularly with smaller museums with a greater reliance on volunteers. There was also a need to consider the development of services that appeal to the Higher, and particularly the Further, Education sector through being more vocationally orientated.

4. The Group expressed the view that, as a sector, museums were not particularly good at capturing outcomes from innovative and informal learning projects. The ILFA framework had not been conceived with pre-school or lifelong learning in mind, but it might be developed to encompass the full spectrum of learning. Alternatively, an assessment could be made by greater use of exit surveys (e.g. by teasing out from individuals what they got out of their visit, or what they experienced or learnt).

5. The Group noted that respondents to the consultation document considered that the sector still needed to do more to strengthen education and learning as a core strategic priority for any museum. It was felt that learning had to be integrated into the wider activity of a museum and that funders were supporting this trend by increasingly looking for evidence that learning was being mainstreamed. However it was felt that the strategy needed to make a clear statement about the importance of educational and learning outcomes to the overall purpose of museums.

6. There was also more to be done to convince those outside the sector that museums were integral to a broadly based learning offer. Or, in terms of schools, they offered transformational potential that built on classroom learning (e.g. by inspiring creativity, adding value to coursework and thereby enriching the school experience and encouraging more learning). It was felt that teacher training should

cover what learning experiences museums do best, so that teachers feel more confident in engaging with museums and their collections and appreciate how museums can compliment classroom teaching.

7. Those needing greater convincing that museums were part of a multi-dimensional approach to learning included, but was not exclusive to, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Local Authorities (through Education talking to Cultural Services), The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). However, to achieve this aim the sector had to garner together its research base, be better at evaluating and communicating outcomes and possibly commence a longitudinal study to make the case more tangible, and less anecdotal, than at present. It was also felt that the sector was its own worst enemy in talking down current evidence as either being anecdotal or somehow less than satisfactory in terms of methodology.

8. There was also a need for museums to identify themselves more strongly with the personalised learning agenda, by connecting with the bigger picture of public participation in pursuits that were part of lifelong learning, or health and well-being agendas. This also encompassed looking at the positioning of museums within the wider consumption of culture and whether user social demographics differed between particular museums and why this was the case. While, this was a very big research agenda, it was one which HE institutions were particularly well placed to explore (e.g. the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester).

Discussion paper: Museums and Galleries and Identity

9. The Group discussed a working paper on identity and how complex issues around place, class, race and other facets of identity inter-related with considerations of citizenship, social capital, social cohesion, and therefore also social inclusion/exclusion. It was considered that museums had a role to play in documenting and maintaining a sense of identity over time. However, through discussion in this and other fora it was apparent that identity was multi-faceted, often subliminal and constantly evolving. Identity could be about specifying what we're not, as well as what we are. Identity was also about more than geographic location or ethnic origin and it was all too easy to set up identity boundaries around exclusion.

10. The Group discussed how certain museums were becoming places of debate, where controversial issues can be openly debated, with the

museum as an institution seen as brave, outward-facing and even edgy in its willingness to challenge perceived orthodoxies. Museums were also utilising identity to create new linkages between the past and the present (e.g. this National Trust property was built from the proceeds of the sugar trade). Traditionally, museum displays had told a narrative from the viewpoint of the curator, but more recently had sought to create more personalised experiences that held greater resonance for particular identity groups. However, to date, the personalisation of the experience had often amounted to time limited outreach work with hard-to-reach groups, rather than mainstream changes to the museum. This meant that users contacted through outreach were unlikely to return to the museum, because what they found in a museum did not make them want to return. Hence, it was argued that identity must be in everything that the museum seeks to do, as otherwise it might achieve the very reverse of what was intended.

11. The Group considered what that the current public perception of museums might be. It was considered that the public saw museums as places providing objective truth. While museum buildings were often off-putting, and worked against the breaking down of barriers that museums sought to overcome. Some hard-to-reach groups probably felt they were being targeted by time limited projects, but the spotlight would soon move on, whilst others (e.g. disabled children) were not being consulted. There was a clear need to 'democratise' what museums were trying to achieve, without creating boxes around poverty, race or disability. Identity was potentially rich and new territory to explore in a national strategy, provided the museums community and stakeholders could agree on what they were seeking to achieve.

12. While Government targets had made some museums reflect upon their attitude towards identity and diversity, true democratic inclusivity was no yet apparent in the sector (e.g. who decides what should be collected from contemporary British culture) and without it there was a risk of initiatives being labelled as political correctness.

13. It was considered that identity as an issue was still largely unexplored by the sector (e.g. why are issues around sexual orientation less often addressed in historic exhibitions, than in contemporary exhibitions). However the strategic challenge was to find ways to help build identities without appearing being tokenistic.

14. It was strongly felt that identity had to run through everything a museum does, from outreach work through to contemporary collecting. It was felt that museums should be reflective of identities, and be neutral places (even where their exhibitions were not neutral) and that

this message had to be sent out to users through the buildings and museum staff. However identity, as a museum issue, was perhaps 10-15 years behind learning in terms of being mainstreamed.

Next meeting

15. The next meeting would be on 6 June and would cover two topics: Workforce and Workforce development; and the structure of the museum sector. Mark Taylor in discussion with Sue Wilkinson would collate a paper on the first, with Paul Kirkman writing a paper on the latter. **Action point: Mark Taylor and Paul Kirkman.**

DCMS Secretariat

These minutes were amended and agreed at the 6 June meeting.