

Minutes of the Collaborative Working Group Meeting 5 April 2006, MLA, Victoria House

Attendees

Sue Wilkinson – Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
David Fleming – National Museum Directors' Conference
Mark Taylor – Museums Association
Helen Wilkinson – Museums Association
Chris White – Local Government Association
Bill Ferris – Association of Independent Museums
Nichola Johnson – University Museums Group
Alec Coles – Renaissance Hub Museums Representative
Marjorie Allthorpe – Guyton – Arts Council England

DCMS

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.
Mark Bates- Deputy Head of the Museums Sponsorship Unit within
MLCPD
Keith Nichol – Head of the Museums Education Team within MLCPD
Maria Mourin – Cultural Property Unit Team within MLCPD
Ian Jenkins – MLA Sponsorship and Regional Museums Team
Lindsey Pickles – MLA Sponsorship and Regional Museums Team

Independent observers:

Saira Law – Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
Fiona Macalister – The National Trust

Minutes of the last meeting

1. The minutes of the 13 March meeting were agreed, subject to three minor changes. Any further suggested changes were to be emailed within 24hrs.

Discussion Paper: Collections

2. The Group discussed a working paper entitled '*Collections*' to explore the most pressing issues, drawing on ideas from the Museum Association's '*Collections for the Future*' Report and the DCMS '*Understanding the Future*' consultation.

3. The working paper discussed the role of collections and the responsibilities of museums. It also considered existing and emerging methods of increasing the use of collections (open storage, loan schemes) and specific issues such as digitisation, acquisitions, collections mobility, and the present approach to appropriate disposal.

4. In opening the discussion, it was suggested that museums had a responsibility to make active use of their collection, as preservation on its own was not enough. This did not mean that all collections had to be displayed, as use could encompass online access, as well as publications and research scholarship. However, the issue of collections being held in store for years, without any form of access, needed to be addressed.

5. The Group agreed that museums needed to articulate their passion and commitment towards collections that went further than just a duty to preserve. However, the Group was conscious that a debate focussed on releasing the potential within collections for public benefit, rather than the preserving for posterity argument, might be caricatured as a lack of respect for the central importance of collections. It would therefore be important to get wide agreement on the purpose of collections from across the profession, academia, and the general public, with buy in from journalistic circles. The strategy would also need to address perceptions of risk and benefit in terms of utilising collections (e.g. risk of damage to objects in handling collections, when set against educational benefits for school children) and stress that access was about all forms of engagement, not just visits.

6. The Group considered that it was important to emphasise the central importance of collections to the function of a museum. This included recognition that trustees were often under a duty to both 'preserve the collection' and 'educate' and the ordering of these two responsibilities made a profound difference to the ethos of a particular museum. The Group felt that the culture of the profession was changing and there was a growing appreciation of the importance of user engagement with collections and putting access and educational arguments on a par, or even above, preservation and inter-generational equity. It was accepted that this was an area of great debate, and that the strategy, and its language, would need to be address those who remained sceptical.

New Forms of Engagement

7. It was felt that new forms of engagement were about putting aspects of collections in new and different contexts. Many ideas had been piloted as small projects (e.g. displays in retail, university or other settings), but there was a lack of funding to replicate successful

ventures. Open storage ventures were thought to be of little benefit to users unless interpretation for the visiting public was provided. But museums might encourage visitors to create their own narrative, or work in partnership with other parts of the cultural sector (e.g. the independent arts sector) to create a context for an object where none was available.

8. The Group felt that there were a number of good practice examples, but information on what did/did not work needed to be captured and disseminated. This could possibly take the form of a research project. More shared programmes between museums would also create a greater crossover of good practice.

Digitisation

9. The Group was concerned about the assumption that digitising collections in their entirety was an access solution. They were concerned about the quality of presentation of digitised content and whether the focus on providing digitised images, often without sufficient narrative, was providing a quality experience for the user. It was felt that digitisation was not an end in itself, but rather a valuable tool in adding depth and greater understanding to the user experience, particularly for 2D visual art. However the degree of public interest in viewing digitised content should not be conflated with the basic information giving functions of a museum web-site.

Research, Skills and Knowledge

10. The Group felt there was a need for reinvestment in research, to foster the necessary skills. The analogy with made to a company losing its R&D function. Without research, which encompassed all forms of investigation into collections, there was likely to be fewer quality exhibitions or publications. There Group considered that greater capacity within the workforce of a museum was desirable, but that museums should also work in partnership with others (e.g. with HE institutions, historians etc) to encourage a more broadly based approach to scholarship encompassing the study of collections. While there were perhaps fewer pure curatorial posts than a generation ago, this could reflect a more multi-disciplinary approach within the museum profession.

Distributed National Collection

11. The theoretical ideal might be a distributed national collection that reflected all parts of the British public realm. However there was desire

for a centrally managed sense of national patrimony that took no account of existing title or the British philosophical approach to collecting, whereby museums had come to reflect the enthusiasms of citizens over time. This diversity of museum provision and collecting was something to celebrate, but also made it difficult to reach consensus on where the gaps in collections lay. In some cases, subject specialist networks had begun to develop a strategic approach to filling collection gaps.

12. The ideal position would also embrace everyone having access to good quality museum provision. However a discussion of 'quality' had to take account of the volume of museum assets not on display, issues of title and whether a nationwide rationalisation/redistribution of collections was possible or desirable. It was suggested that this might be achieved through loans or a brokerage system, whereby objects that might otherwise remain in storage are displayed in another museum with benefits in terms refreshing displays and audience development. Such incoming objects could displace objects of less contextual value in that subject discipline, that might then ultimately be disposed of. However museums were primarily rewarded for what they delivered, rather than what they loaned to others. So there was a case for looking at funding incentives that encouraged loans or changes of ownership between museums. A *'Treasures of the Regions'* exhibition might help to alter hearts and minds by placing the emphasis squarely on audience development, rather than institutional ownership.

13. The Group considered that the aim of a creating a national distributed collection was laudable and certain institutions had made steps in that direction that might be repeatable elsewhere. However this was a political juggernaut of an issue that raised all manner of subsidiary issues, ranging from who pays through to concerns around perceptions of 'selling the family silver'.

Acquisition and Disposal

14. It was noted that there were fewer acquisitions by museums today, when compared to the 1960s and 1970s. There was a perception (probably misplaced and founded on high prices for fine art) that museums could not singularly, or in partnership, successfully secure external funding for acquisitions and consequently there was not the volume of applications to funding bodies. The Group considered there was a need to ensure that collections remained dynamic. There was a skills gap in terms of curators being trained in how to acquire objects for collections. There was also a need to foster a climate whereby informed decisions could be made on disposal, possibly backed by peer review

judgements, which took account of the inherent cost of having objects in storage and the need to avoid collections stagnating.

Resources

15. In considering collections, the Group was particularly conscious of the limited resources of many smaller museums, and the cost involved in effectively utilising collections through updating displays, hosting temporary exhibitions, or pursuing new forms of engagement. The lack of support, outside of Renaissance, had resulted in many museums having unchanging displays for a number of years. Any discussion of collections also needed to acknowledge the on-going debate on fiscal measures to encourage greater philanthropy towards museums.

Next Meeting

16. The next meeting would be on 3 May and would cover two themes. Keith Nichol would write a short working paper on learning, while Alec Coles would produce a paper on identity. **Action Point: Keith Nichol and Alec Coles.**

DCMS Secretariat

These minutes were amended and agreed at the 3 May meeting.