

Minutes of the Collaborative Working Group 13 March 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
Bill Ferris – Association of Independent Museums
Alec Coles – Renaissance Hub Museums Representative
Nichola Johnson – University Museums Group

DCMS

Paul Kirkman (chair)
Ben Cowell
Keith Nichol
Ian Jenkins
Gemma Gaines

Independent observers

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

Introductions

1. Apologies for absence: David Fleming (National Museum Directors' Conference), Chris White (Local Government Association) and Paul Barnes (DCMS)

2. The minutes of the 8 February meeting were agreed, with one correction on the date of the Museum Association Conference. It was also agreed that minutes could be published on the DCMS website once they had been agreed by the Group.

Discussion paper: Why Museums?

3. The Group discussed a working paper entitled '*Why Museums?*' to investigate what the sector and DCMS consider museums are for, what they provide for the nation, and how this could inform a draft national strategy document. The working paper drew on the mission statements of the museums represented, as well as documents and articles on economic and public value. It posed some questions around the

importance of *intrinsic value*, *institutional value*, and *instrumental value* and how perceived benefits might be enhanced in the future. The aim is to shape a discussion on how Government and the sector might produce a clearer statement of the public value of museums.

Intrinsic value

4. In opening the discussion, it was suggested that Government had yet to find the language to truly articulate the intrinsic value of museums, or their unique selling point (USP). The Group considered that 'intrinsic value' and collections were inextricably linked. Collections and their conservation were a key reason why museums exist. Hence there was a USP for museums to be articulated around conserving objects for the future (intergenerational equity), with museums providing a sense of connection between past, present and future, but with the emphasis still on meeting and shaping the needs of current users. Individual objects could also have 'intrinsic value' through having a resonance, although it was more difficult to articulate this without sounding overly vague.

Institutional value

5. On 'institutional value', the Group considered that museums were different from other cultural activity; in that the public could not so easily engage via multiple participatory levels (i.e. a member of public cannot easily create their own museum). Over time, this had helped reinforce a 'sense of place' with museums encompassing strong institutional values that could be traced back to the historic mission of museums to conserve and store objects for future generations.

6. Museums had prospered because they were able to benefit society through conserving objects for posterity. As a result, museums had acquired a reputation as neutral institutional environments where issues, beliefs, passions and questions of identity could be openly examined – but all rooted in the conservation of collections. It was unclear whether the institutional values of a given museum were transferable outside of its physical walls. But there was a belief that institutional value constituted more than the sum of a museum's component parts (the collections, the building, and the people who worked there).

Instrumental value

7. The Group debated the role of Museums in seeking to create 'instrumental value', (investment in x will produce y outcomes). Museums were clearly creating enormous instrumental value across a range of areas; the economic sphere through tourism and its wider

multiplier impacts; education and lifelong learning; community identity/inclusion/pride; and fostering individual well-being through an enjoyable or enlightening experience. However, the fact that none of these were unique to Museums had led to perceptions of publicly funded museums being focussed on the agendas of other parts of Government, rather than asserting the more difficult value concepts of culture. Such issues had been explored in John Holden's essay (Capturing Cultural Value, DEMOS) that was referenced in the working paper.

8. A particularly high instrumental value could be put on museums in terms of learning. Through educational encounters, museums were able to tell a story utilising collections that was different from gaining knowledge from other media, such as reading a book. It was suggested that an in-depth study could investigate how enjoyment and inspiration were linked to improvements in gaining knowledge, applying understanding or in changes in individual behaviour.

9. Similarly, individual enjoyment and fulfilment were an important priority for museums. Enjoyment was seen as crucial and linked to inspiration and learning. However, it was difficult to accurately assess what induced people, and particularly repeat visitors, to pass through the doors of a museum, as current surveys did not fully reflect complex motivating factors, or what a member of the public might ultimately derive from a visit over a longer timeframe. The lack of a proper longitudinal assessment framework for visitor satisfaction made it difficult to articulate the contribution made by museums to human well-being, other than by looking at visitor return rates and overall numbers. On the other hand, it was felt that there is a real value in plain visitor numbers. If people do not like the Museums they won't keep coming.

10. It was increasingly being accepted that visiting a museum was helpful in acquiring a multi-dimensional view of the world. It was also noted that people valued museums on more than an individualistic level – i.e. people might not go to museums themselves, but they recognised the value of museums to other people as a community resource, and this again was difficult to capture in surveys.

11. It was felt that instrumental values were not solely about non-cultural agendas, but about seeing museums as contributing to a holistic view of individual and social well-being, that included disadvantaged and hard-to-reach groups. However museums, unlike certain other sectors, had to prove that their social impact on people's lives was tangible.

12. Economic value was particularly prevalent in the independent museum sector where museums were more commercial and more

closely identified with visitor attractions. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) also often made reference to museums in regional or city-based promotional strategies designed to attract inward investment.

Conclusion

13. The Group agreed that as well as instrumental values, intrinsic and institutional values were important considerations in justifying public expenditure on grounds of public benefit. It was suggested that additional questions in the DCMS 'Taking Part' Household Survey might help capture further insights into the intrinsic value the public place on museums.

14. It was agreed that the April meeting would focus on collections, including issues around digitisation. The May meeting would discuss two themes: learning and identity, while the June meeting would cover the theme of workforce development and the make-up of the sector. It was suggested that the June discussion should also embrace collaborative working outside the sector, for instance with Higher Education. It was agreed that at future meetings it would be important to focus on how museums want to be in the 21st century, and what a few common goals might be.

DCMS Secretariat

These minutes were amended and agreed at the 5 April meeting.