



Management Response to the DCMS Museum Peer Review Pilot Report for the Natural History Museum

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The numbering in this response relates directly to the numbering of the Peer Review Report.

Chapter 1: Background

1.1. The self assessment and peer review pilot process

The Natural History Museum (NHM) welcomed being part of the pilot scheme for peer review of DCMS sponsored museums and galleries. Our experience of peer review of our scientific departments directed by our Trustees led us to believe we could make a beneficial contribution to the development of the peer review process for the longer term future.

We support the opinion that peer review represents an appropriate way to monitor the performance of the NHM over time against a set of criteria that arose from the McMaster Review (*Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement*) and that the outcome of the current review should serve as a baseline in this respect. However, this management response, due to be considered alongside the Peer Review Report itself, by the NHM's Board of Trustees on 24 February 2009, necessarily omits the Board's view of the process as undertaken, its outcome or its value to them in providing an independent assessment of the NHM's performance. We are also of the opinion that a review which omits scrutiny of a major proportion of the work the NHM undertakes, that is, our science, must be interpreted carefully, especially as the excellence of our science is crucial to underpin the public facing activities we undertake, as acknowledged by the Reviewers.

We are very grateful to the Review Panel and to the DCMS officials that supported them in the conduct of the Review and preparation of their Report. The Review Panel were highly engaged, clearly went to great lengths to understand the NHM and what they saw, and have evidently put enormous thought into their recommendations. Our view is that the size of the team, the duration of their visit and the prescribed ten page limit of the NHM's written self-assessment made the process very demanding for the Review Panel. We would welcome further discussion on this as we believe it would benefit the longer term development of the process.

By contrast, simultaneous to the conduct of the DCMS Peer Review, a Trustee led visiting group was evaluating our Mineralogy Department (one of six science departments). This process involved a review team of six members, three full days on site plus preparation and follow up, and a written submission of approximately 200 pages. The ability to provide a longer self-assessment submission would have given the NHM management the confidence to use fewer presentations during the review process and allow the Peer Review Panel to spend more time interrogating managers to support their lines of inquiry.

The duration of the Peer Review resulted in less engagement with the NHM's Trustees than might have been desirable. Since it is impractical to expect all Trustees to be available for the entire process, we recommend that consideration be given to if and how a representative cross section of the Board could be consulted in future reviews. Our Board's own views will be useful in this respect.

Overall, the NHM regards the Peer Review process undertaken as a positive experience. The need to be concise about the breadth and depth of the NHM's activities in the Peer Review process was a useful pressure in prioritising our work and the recommendations in the Report enable us in this management response to provide further explanation of things we are already doing which it appears did not emerge during the Review, and also explain the impediments and constraints to progressing some other work.

1.2. The Natural History Museum

This section is a useful summary of the NHM's current plans and some of our headline performance data. If Peer Review Reports are to be made available publicly, we believe it is important and appropriate to list alongside this information the key statutory obligations that exist, in our case as the result of the British Museum Act (1963), the Museums and Galleries Act (1992) Such information could be provided by appropriate website references.

Chapter 2: Judgement of Excellence in Central Museum Functions

2.1. Public Offer

We are grateful for acknowledgement of what has been achieved in recent years at a time when the NHM has been investing heavily in the second phase of the Darwin Centre (DC2). The increase in visitor numbers of 136% since the introduction of free admission has been, we believe, greater than for any large, London based national museum/gallery, yet our ambition in this respect remains to seek further significant growth. The large capital investment in DC2 has necessarily meant that the development of public offer in the NHM has had to be tactical and selective. The benefit of this has been the capability to incorporate lessons learned from such experimental work into our future plans for the refurbishment of new galleries and the development on new programmes of activity for 2009/10 and beyond. Further improvement of our public offer is a priority for capital expenditure beyond the opening of DC2 in Autumn 2009.

2.2. Learning programmes

We thank and acknowledge the Panel's comments on our Learning programme and in particular about the *Real World Science* project. It is important to recognise that this Project is about providing quality learning experiences for secondary science students, so is therefore not simply about increasing numbers of participants. We believe developments of this work can help address the drop-off in interest in science amongst 11 to 16 year-olds and contribute to government policy in addressing an acknowledged skills gap. The Project has also been used successfully for advocacy reasons in positioning us with Government and the wider science education community. More could be done in this respect and we are constantly looking at ways to engage more in this policy arena. The new 'Find Your Talent' initiative marks a shift in focus which undermines the longer term funding of *Real World Science* by the DCMS/DCSF Strategic Commissioning Programme, a development we are concerned about due to the different mechanisms for delivery. We can and will look at funding the Project from our own core funds, but this would not guarantee that our

regional delivery partners could do the same, and the reallocation of funds would impact the breadth and depth of our current learning offer.

The use of the teachers' panel in providing valuable feedback on our Learning offer is indeed innovative and part of the Museum's public value agenda in engaging our stakeholders in our decision-making.

We also thank and acknowledge the Panel's comments about our New Audiences work, especially the *Slavery and the Natural World* project. These small, high-cost, experimental projects typically have high quality impacts for very low volumes of Museum users and are at risk of future funding reallocation, as we would seek to protect our core Learning offer with its higher volume outputs.

2.3. International reputation

The Panel's comments in this section are perceptive and relevant. The NHM regards it as crucial that it is seen as a leader in its field amongst international competitors and collaborators. Our scientists must strive for excellence and international recognition and it is for this reason that we seek to recruit scientific research vacancies from a global talent pool. Whilst the Panel have acknowledged and commented on the constraints faced by the NHM in this respect, it is important to state that the restrictions in managing pay that are concurrent with the NHM's NDPB status (specifically the required approval of the annual pay remit by HM Treasury and management within public sector pay restraint) puts the Museum at a significant competitive disadvantage compared to higher education institutions employing directly comparable staff. This is especially important as the best scientific researchers generate significant external grant income which covers all their costs and contributes additionally to Museum overheads.

2.4. Darwin Centre Phase 2

The timing and duration of the Peer Review Panel's visit did not allow presentation of all aspects of this important project for the NHM. The Panel were able to tour the building as part of our determination to show the range of collection storage conditions that exist in the Museum, and our ambition with regard to public offer. As recommended by the panel, there has been a considerable amount of work undertaken to ensure the delivery of the anticipated benefits of the new building, but time did not allow this to be presented to the Panel in detail. Our Benefits Realisation Plan is in line with the expectations of the Office of Government Commerce (OGC) Peer Review gateway process. As a large, publicly funded project, DC2 is subjected to periodic review by an OGC sponsored peer review team. The next review, to be conducted in late spring/early summer 2009, is Gateway 4 – 'Readiness for Service', but of greater relevance here is Gateway 5 – 'Operational Review and Benefits Realisation' which will test the DC2's operational deployment and the extent to which our Benefits Realisation Plan has been delivered. Details of Gateway 5 can be found from the OGC website:

http://www.ogc.gov.uk/documents/FINAL_BOOK_5.pdf

We expect Gateway 5 to be conducted within the first 12 months after opening of DC2.

We also recognise that although much of the NHM's more innovative public programmes are centred on Darwin Centre, the successful components of this work will be deployed in all areas of the Museum and public spaces are refurbished and renovated.

2.5. Use of the NHM's scientific excellence in public facing activities

The Peer Review Panel has in this area perceptively highlighted three questions that challenge the Museum's senior management on an ongoing basis. The questions are both very old and of contemporary relevance, and how they are addressed will inevitably change repeatedly over time. In section 2.1 the Panel comments that it was "impressed by the NHM's use of interdisciplinary project teams drawing on the expertise of scientists, learning, visitor services and web team in developing an exhibition'. Likewise in this section the Panel express their confidence that '...this could be achieved through the fine tuning of existing internal practices and structures'.

We are not complacent about this issue. The biggest challenge is for the scientists themselves. Their own standing in their research communities depends on the quality and quantity of the research that they do, so their reputation is confirmed by their publication record, their ability to win external grant funding and their interactions with their international peer group. Their input into the NHM's public facing activities is both a unique selling point for the Museum and a wonderful platform for them to demonstrate the public relevance of their work, but this contributes relatively little to their research credibility, at least compared to the potential time commitment. In addition, although scientific expertise is essential for the content of our exhibitions and public programmes, how dialogue with the intended audiences is best carried out is another area of expertise, not necessarily compatible with the peer to peer communication inherent in research excellence. The solution is to find the balance between involvement of our scientists in a time efficient manner and the input from, particularly, interpretation and learning specialists who can interpret the key messages and incorporate them into exhibitions and programmed activities in ways appropriate for their intended audiences. Evaluation of our plans and completed projects forms a large component of how such work is advanced.

2.6. Development of our people

The Peer Review Panel have correctly identified that we are in the process of determining how to implement a talent management programme within the NHM. This is a relatively new development which we are keen to advance, but recognise the high cost in delivering a programme that is meaningful and will deliver the major objectives we seek. The Panel were right that there was some uncertainty at the time of the review, indeed still is at the time of writing, as to how this programme will be advanced because of the impact of the current economic climate on the Museum's finances.

The overall approach to management within the NHM is to encourage active participation in the planning process, to ensure all members of staff have clear line of sight between what they do and the principal objectives of our corporate plan. The Panel have observed that this manifests itself as "...managers are given a large amount of discretion to deliver departmental objectives within an overall planning framework". We believe that this approach encourages creativity and measured risk taking, important components of a successful organisation.

The NHM's senior management have a high degree of understanding of the turnover of staff within the Museum, informed in part by our Annual Staff Opinion Survey, but more particularly by the provision of monthly HR information which will be enhanced further with the introduction of a new HR database during 2009/10.

2.7. Our 'brand shift'

The Peer Review Panel has identified the significance of the work that we are doing on how different major stakeholder groups for the Museum currently perceive us, and how we would want that perception to be modified over the upcoming years. The

opening of DC2, the interest in the NHM as the result of this, Darwin's bicentenary year and our key role in organising the national response under the 'Darwin200' initiative, and the airing of a BBC documentary series on the NHM in 2010 are all opportunities to advance this work very actively in the near future. A key development is work to demonstrate the Museum's public value, and whilst this work is ongoing, we are confident that work undertaken thus far will be extremely helpful in shaping our future plans to better satisfy the different needs of the eight major stakeholder groups in the NHM that we have identified.

Chapter 3: Areas for Development

We are particularly grateful to the Peer Review Panel for their detailed recommendations in this section. In the main these recommendations reflect our own assessment of future challenges and ways that we will need to face up to them. The recommendations also force us to confront the constraints and limitations that we will need to overcome in order to realise all of our ambitious plans.

Essential

3.1. Permanent galleries in the Waterhouse building

The recommendations of the Panel under this heading are a recognised issue for the NHM's Senior Management and Trustees. The enormous undertaking in delivering a project the size of DC2 has forced the NHM to limit expenditure on permanent galleries across the South Kensington site, though the planning work for a scheme to address the refurbishment of major galleries is essentially complete, and scheme designs for a number of galleries are in place. A balance between large scale investment in permanent gallery refurbishment and shorter term interventions to improve display and interpretation in existing galleries is a tactical decision to be informed by the NHM's Master-plan Development Framework (MDF), currently close to completion and due to be signed off by Trustees at their meeting in May 2009. The MDF is a framework to inform decisions about the strategic use of the Museum's built estate and to ensure that short-term decisions do not impinge on the delivery of longer term needs.

Recent public value work with Opinion Leader has reinforced the Panel's view that it is important to include the widespread use of examples of the NHM's own scientific work in the public galleries. This is our intention, but the rate limiting step to achieving such change will be the ability to fund major capital projects. The current range of costs for renewing exhibitions is in the range of £2,000 to £5,000 per square metre, resulting, with improvements to Victorian infrastructure, in overall costs to renew individual galleries in the range of £4m-£12m+. Even without other capital expenditure priorities in collection storage, improving infrastructure and developing our virtual presence, the current capital Grant-In-Aid allocation of £4m per annum requires the NHM to generate several multiples of this amount annually to make significant progress in gallery renewal, a task made more difficult by the current economic climate.

3.2. Audience development

The series of recommendations by the Panel in this section is also well recognised and understood by Senior Management and Trustees. The NHM has invested significant time and resource in undertaking audience segmentation studies with external consultants. As a result, audiences for new public offer are segregated into three major categories, core, developmental and experimental, with due recognition of the need to invest in each of these categories to differing extents. Our audiences are segmented in a variety of ways, including by demographic grouping and

according to motivation (i.e. 'Family Focused', 'Learned Liberals', 'Cultured Pleasure Seekers' and 'Theme Park Purists').

Work is already underway to better understand the opportunities to interpret the NHM's collections using additional approaches other than that based on a purely scientific interpretation. Such work is being progressed under the banner of 'New Perspectives' and may in future incorporate elements of research in Social Science and the History of Science.

The attraction of 11-15 year olds represents an interesting challenge for the NHM. Young people in this age group typically will be transitioning from visiting as a leisure activity within a family group to establishing their own independent choice. In this latter respect we are, therefore, competing for this audience against a wide range of leisure activities increasingly dominated by on-line social networking and computer gaming. We do not consider that the challenge in attracting 11-15 year olds in their leisure time is at odds with our emphasis on building a secondary schools programme for the same age group. Indeed, success with the Real World Science programme may result in wider acceptance of institutions with natural history collections and resident scientists as places to visit in leisure time, especially if our virtual offer (see below) can similarly enable us to engage with this audience segment.

Currently the NHM has not attempted to calculate what the optimal visitor numbers might be on an annual basis. The current underlying trend in visits to the NHM remains upward, and we fully expect the opening of DC2 to have a further positive effect. In addition, our Master-plan Development Framework is allowing us to address known limitations of the South Kensington site in terms of visitor circulation and crowd management. We completely agree with the Panel's view that quality of visitor experience must not be diminished by over-crowding. However, the last step-change in attendance figures (from c.3.25m to c.3.75m per annum) has been achieved not by an increase in the absolute numbers attending on the busiest days or the percentage of days with the highest visitor numbers, but by an increasing percentage of days with medium to high visitor loading at the expense of lower ones. Such analysis suggests that with planned changes to visitor circulation and management, optimal visitor numbers are considerably above our immediate ambitions.

Finally in this section, the Senior Executive is very clear in its view as to how the NHM should be positioned to exercise its voice of authority on the natural world, and this is underpinned by existing perceptions in key stakeholder groups. The NHM is seen as an objective, independent commentator on natural world issues and can be relied upon to present an accurate, informed and unbiased account of issues in its area of expertise. We regard this 'brand positioning' as appropriate for a publicly funded scientific institution and as incompatible with a 'campaigning' stance. However, how the NHM presents scientific evidence on major issues of the day, such as the effects of climate change and threats to global biodiversity, and our role in altering public attitudes and behaviours remains a complex and interesting series of questions to be further addressed in our 'brand shift' work.

Strongly desirable

3.3. The NHM's virtual presence

The Panel have correctly identified the importance of advancing work in this area, as evidenced by the NHM's Senior Executive team denoting this as a corporate priority for 2008/9 that will continue into 2009/10 and beyond. There are two elements to this work, further enhancing the NHM's web presence for both scientific peer groups and

our public engagement work, and ensuring we have a well thought through strategy for digitisation of the NHM's collections. In the latter case, linkage with other major collaborative projects such as the Biodiversity Heritage Library and the EU Funded projects EDIT and SYNTHESIS will be of critical importance. For the former, developing web content and functionality of our own site needs to be considered alongside collaborative work by our own scientific staff on sites hosted by other organisations. Additionally, both thinking through and subsequently raising funds to put in place the increased IT infrastructure to deliver our aspirations will be a major challenge.

We feel it important to stress here that we see digital projects as a way of adding value and enhancing access to our collections as well as generating additional public interest in visiting the physical Museum and deriving more from the experience. We do not see virtual visits to the NHM being an attractive or desirable replacement for actual visits to see real objects interpreted by our own staff.

3.4. Regional partnerships

In recent years the NHM has deliberately pursued international partnerships more avidly than those in the UK regions as we believe that strong partnerships are best forged and survive most effectively when each side brings something substantial to the table. International partnerships with major collaborators of a similar status (large, national collections) have proved an attractive target and have delivered many benefits. Real World Science has clearly been an exception and has benefited from effective regional partners working collaboratively on the use of natural history collections to inspire young people. However its longer term future may be threatened by changes to the future funding of Strategic Commissioning by DCMS and DCSF and whilst we may be able to divert resources from other learning activities to maintenance of support for our activities on Real World Science, we doubt the capability of smaller regional partners to do so. We have other projects in development with regional partners, not all of which depend on work with Museums, but we recognise that we could be doing more in this area and plan to do so when the delivery of DC2 has been successfully completed.

For consideration

3.5. Appointment of a Deputy Director

The current structure of the NHM Senior Executive team was put in place from October 2004 but has been modified only minimally since in order to ensure successful delivery of the DC2 Programme. Once the DC2 Programme is complete and the final OGC Gateway Review has been conducted, some revision of the Senior Executive Team structure will be considered in consultation with the Board of Trustees. The appointment of a Deputy Director is not currently anticipated, as to make such an appointment risks favouring the scientific or public facing side of the organisation which needs to be kept in careful balance. Equally, the appointment of a Deputy that looks after all operational and 'back office' functions, whilst attractive in freeing up the Director's time to focus on longer-term strategic issues, risks diminishing the individual importance of the roles of the Directors of Finance, HR, Policy and Planning and Estates, each of which has important contributions to make and objectives to deliver in the life of the current corporate plan.

3.6. Use of consultants to develop the NHM brand

The NHM introduced a new visual identity in late 2004 and the development of the thinking behind the new branding, and how this should influence institutional behaviour was delivered in conjunction with brand consultants, Jane Wentworth Associates. More recently, the public value work has been developed and is further ongoing with assistance from Opinion Leader. Our preferred way of working is to use

external consultants where they can add value or direct expertise to our own, but not to short circuit either necessary institutional learning or the development of our own creative thinking. We recognise the Panel's reasons for suggesting that additional help might help clarify our longer term thinking in terms of 'brand shift' and we will consider this recommendation at appropriate intervals as this piece of work advances.

3.7. Exerting influence on development of the curriculum for teaching science

Exercising our voice of authority on the natural world is an aspiration that we propose to advance in a number of policy areas within the confines of our expertise. Opinion formers and policy makers in education are a key stakeholder group for the NHM and it is our expectation that increasing engagement with this community will inexorably lead to our involvement in the development of the teaching curriculum for primary and secondary school science education. We see this outcome as a logical extension of our brand shift and public value work.

3.8. Further improving collection storage facilities

We felt it appropriate as part of the Peer Review process to show the Panel the best and worst of current collection storage conditions. This, and an exposition on our Master-plan Development Framework was designed to exemplify our determination not just to get some collections into the best possible long-term storage facilities, such as DC2, but also to deliver a plan to get all collections in the minimum acceptable standards of storage as fast as possible. We already have work underway and capital expenditure allocations earmarked for the delivery of this latter aspiration, recognising other capital expenditure priorities that also exist. At the time of writing we recognise that our aspirations for essential capital projects outstrip our current resources to fund them and, therefore, raising additional funds is an urgent necessity.

Chapter 4: Evaluation of the Self-Assessment

The Peer Review Panel has commented against a number of headings on the effectiveness of the NHM's submission in the Self-Assessment documentation. Overall we felt that the prescriptive restriction of a ten page document presented insurmountable challenges in conveying the full depth and breadth of the NHM's activities, but tried to supplement this with appropriate additional documentation and presentations during the Panel's visit.

Comments here are mainly designed to inform the process of enhancing the Peer Review process for later iterations.

4.1. What is the strategic vision of your museum?

We appreciate the Panel's understanding of our view that our approach to planning is to treat it as a process of continuous improvement. Each year we seek to further improve the effectiveness of our planning cycle in delivering an update to our published corporate plan. We acknowledge too that the Panel has correctly assessed the need for such planning processes to work effectively within our complex organisational culture.

4.2.. How do you measure success and excellence in meeting it?

The issues of substance here relate to the quality of the NHM's science, which was outside the scope of the Peer Review, and the difficulty in establishing mechanisms to record some outcomes of the NHM's public programmes. Whilst we understand the decision to exclude our science from the Peer Review process, its important contribution to the NHM's public facing activities cannot be under-estimated. We

believe that such issues are likely to be relevant to other specialist areas of other museums and galleries and, therefore, further consideration should be given to this in considering how to advance the Peer Review process beyond its pilot phase.

In assessing our own performance we recognise the same limitation as the Panel in "...developing a more in depth qualitative understanding of the impact of a visit upon the visitor's scientific knowledge and thinking about the natural world." Our view is that such understanding can only realistically be achieved by resource expensive, long-term longitudinal studies on visitor outcomes. Given the importance of visitor outcomes to the NHM, we will consider the extent to which such work may be practicable within the ongoing project on better demonstrating our public value.

4.3. What has gone well recently? What hasn't?

The Panel's comments in this area reflect the view that this was the weakest area of our submission. At the time of its production we felt that this section suffered more than most from the prescriptive limitation on page extent of our submission. We also felt that to select case studies from a wide range of possible examples in each category had the potential to be seen as a de-motivating influence.

In hindsight we agree that the opportunity to review with the Peer Review Panel remedial actions for areas of required improvement is an opportunity that should be encouraged as part of the overall process. We would want to ensure that this is acted upon for future reviews of the NHM and as part of improving the process for application to other museums and galleries.

4.4. What are your particular plans and how will you fulfil them?

We note here the Panel's observations as to the extent to which DC2 has dominated the NHM's plans and should not be allowed to prejudice the delivery of other essential projects such as the integrated digital strategy and the brand shift. Our expectation is that 2009/10 will represent a significant year of change, with resource being deployed on delivering the anticipated benefits accruing from DC2 and a new focus on other long-term plans.

4.5. What challenges and opportunities do you foresee in undertaking them?

We are gratified that the Panel are confident in our ability to make the most of the opportunities we envisage for the NHM, notwithstanding issues related to funding and staffing.

4.6. Do you have the leadership needed to achieve your goals and are you positioned to be adaptable to change?

Notwithstanding the very positive comments from the Panel in this section, we acknowledge the self-assessment submission did not address clearly enough why the NHM Senior Executive thinks the organisation has the leadership it needs to succeed. In addition, in future iterations of this process we would seek to ensure greater Trustee involvement in the Peer Review Process.

Chapter 5: Summary Against the McMaster Criteria for Excellence

This section represents the Panel's opinion and we broadly accept the conclusions against each criterion. In essence the summary follows the recommendations in Chapter 3 to which responses have been set out in detail above.

Natural History Museum
18 February 2009

