Understanding the Future:
Museums and 21st Century Life – A Summary of Responses
Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life

Summary of Responses
## Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction............................................................................................................................................... 5  
Chapter 2: Collections and their Uses.................................................................................................................... 9  
Chapter 3: Learning and Research..........................................................................................................................11  
Chapter 4: Careers, Training and Leadership......................................................................................................14  
Chapter 5: Coherence and Advocacy........................................................................................................................17  
Chapter 6: Partnership and Measuring Value.........................................................................................................19  
Chapter 7: Respondents.............................................................................................................................................22
Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) launched Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st Century Life on 27 January 2005. The consultation ran until 30 June 2005, seventy-five responses were received. This summary sets out who responded, indicating possible routes for further discussion.

The views represented here are those of the respondents and are not necessarily the views of DCMS. Nor do they represent the Department’s policy directions or future commitments.

Understanding the Future

The aim of Understanding the Future was not only to celebrate the achievements by the museum sector but also to look at what aspects of England’s museums needed to be addressed to face the challenges. Key challenges and opportunities facing England’s museums were identified and ideas and suggestions aired for positive change.

Five themes were highlighted for consideration:

- Collections and their Uses;
- Learning and Research;
- Careers, Training and Leadership;
- Coherence and Advocacy; and
- Partnership and Measuring Value

Thirteen questions were posed for the sector to respond and were based on the context of the themes mentioned above. The publication challenged the museums sector to identify better working practices between Government, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA),
Governing Authorities and museums themselves. The publication also stated that Government should not be the only driver on instigating change; the sector should look to itself and identify clear strategies that would enable museums to thrive in the 21st Century.

This was the first opportunity for the sector to participate in such a wide-ranging consultation and debate in recent history. The seventy-five responses have been considered in line with the Code of Practice on Consultation and this document includes an analysis of responses to the questions asked.

Next Steps

The consultation document was broad ranging and has produced a similarly wide-ranging set of responses.

The museums sector have indicated in their response to Understanding the Future that; there is no overwhelming desire to uproot existing national funding structures, to create a Museums Funding Council or other such body. It is clear that there is a strong desire that the sector should be more concerned that we enable the most talented people in the sector to flourish and to deliver on the ground the activities which will make the greatest difference to people’s quality of life.

The responses clearly showed that DCMS must take the lead in providing clear guidance to establish a long-term national strategy framework for museums. The over-arching theme for the framework will be “working in partnership”.

Therefore, the sector needs to look at how best partnership working can be achieved and the steps needed to implement this practice. DCMS will initiate open and consultative dialogue with the sector on the priorities for museums policy, and a chance to take a more visible lead. DCMS sees this as not an end itself, but as a first step towards establishing, in a collaborative way, a set of strategic priorities and challenging goals for the sector.
The Minister for Culture, David Lammy, has agreed to chair the first meeting of a collaborative working group. DCMS will engage with representatives from the following organisations, who will in turn consult widely with other groups and associations to discuss areas of direct concern.

The group will consist of representatives from:

- The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council;
- The National Museums Directors’ Conference;
- The Museums Association;
- Local Government Association;
- Association of Independent Museums;
- The Heritage Lottery Fund;
- Renaissance Hub Representative
- University Museums Group; and an
- Independent observer

To take *Understanding the Future* forward we therefore recommend:

- Establishing a collaborative working group with key stakeholders;
- Working towards a wider seminar for the sector early in 2006 to discuss proposals;
- Publish a national strategy framework in 2006, setting out long-term collaborative goals for DCMS and the sector.
Who Responded

<table>
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<th>CATEGORY OF RESPONDENT</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>% OF TOTAL</th>
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<td>National Museums sponsored by DCMS</td>
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<td>Renaissance Regional Hub Museums</td>
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<td>Other Regional and local museums</td>
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<tr>
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Chapter 2: Collections and their Uses

Q1: How should museums develop and utilise their collections to serve the concerns and interests of the whole population most effectively? Should this include releasing parts of their collections to others, including outside the museum?

Q2: How can the sector ensure that the opportunities offered by ICT, electronic access and digitisation are fully utilised for the benefit of users and reach out to non-users?

Many respondents felt that museums needed to do more to listen to the needs of their communities and particularly to target the interests of the local population through outreach work. Practical suggestions included closer working with other local service providers, such as primary care trusts and schools; encouraging wider public engagement through the media, an example being the recent Picture of Britain television series; research with non-museum users to identify the barriers to engagement; and checking that interpretation of collections really reflected the interests of the population as a whole.

Replies received also cited a need to improve underlying basic collections management so that museums can serve the population effectively (e.g. a comprehensive record of all museum collections). There was also praise for the Museums Association for reopening debate on disposal with their Collections for the Future Report. Some respondents suggested that object handling should be further developed, with a greater number of objects being incorporated into handling collections and collection boxes for schools and community groups.

There were calls for museums to work in closer partnership to make better use of their collections. Suggestions included a national framework to achieve a sustained programme of touring exhibitions and a national object loan scheme. Other respondents wanted to relax the parameters of the Government Indemnity Scheme to encourage more loans within the UK and overseas.
Respondents gave a cautious welcome to the idea of loaning objects of lesser significance to those outside the museum context, with most support if loans, or perhaps semi-permanent displays, were offered to venues run by another public body. There was a broad acceptance that such loans played a significant role in making culture accessible to non-users. However, there was little support for permanently transferring the ownership of objects of museum quality to those outside the public sector. Although one respondent commented that museums must not get too precious about ownership.

Funding for acquisitions was seen as important in ensuring that aspects of contemporary creativity are included in collection building, particularly before prices exceeded available finance. There were calls for closer cooperation with Arts Council England on visual arts acquisitions. Many respondents wanted to see further taxation and charitable giving incentives to enable museums to enhance their collections, or sustained funding for the care of existing collections.

There was a widespread belief that the sector needed to do more to ensure that the opportunities offered by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), electronic access and digitisation were being fully utilised. There were concerns that e-functions were still not considered as core museum business, with all that entailed for sustainable staffing and financial budgets. There was strong support for a joined up ICT strategy, to include the development of a set of common standards.

Respondents saw a number of ICT opportunities to bring benefits to users and reach out to non-users in the wider public, including greater use of hand-held media, interactive TV, a teacher’s portal, improving web-site content and enabling the public to create their own virtual exhibitions leading to new e-content creation. There were calls for leading museums to be more proactive in embracing cutting edge technology and for museums to have sustained funding in order to engage ICT expertise from outside the sector. Other respondents expressed caution over ICT investment, citing development costs, or the risk of overlooking the high percentage of adults who have never accessed the Internet.
Chapter 3: Learning and Research

Q3: How can museums strengthen their commitment to education as a core and strategic priority within the overall commitment to collections and users?

Q4: How can a strong research culture be built and sustained, as well as quality measured across the museums sector? What role should the Government play?

Q5: How could stronger links be created between the Higher and Further Education sectors and museums?

Respondents suggested a number of ways that museums could strengthen their commitment to education as a core strategic priority. There was strong support for MLA’s Inspiring Learning for All framework being adopted by all museums as a demonstration of the sector’s commitment to education. A number of respondents also felt that Heads of Education had to be part of the museum senior management team to ensure that learning was recognised as central to the purpose of the museum. A couple of respondents wanted to create a link between Heritage Lottery Fund award criteria and evidence of a museum’s commitment to education.

On funding, a number of responses called for more sustainability, and particularly the continuation of DCMS/DFES Strategic Commissioning. There was also support for greater clarity on the various DfES initiatives and associated funding streams (e.g. Gifted and Talented) and a desire in general to move away from the short term project funding. It was also felt that museums would benefit from financial incentives to challenge them to develop innovative resources for teachers.

Many respondents gave specific examples of current partnership working with schools and teachers in support of the National Curriculum. Many were keen to develop further their informal education role. Suggestions included offering more varied out-of-classroom learning experiences; on-line activities utilising digitised collections and outreach programmes for community groups. One respondent wanted to see museums establishing a more two-way relationship with schools, through inviting teachers into museums to look at resources and
programmes. Another respondent suggested further consultation with teachers in making better use of collection loan boxes.

Some respondents also wanted to broaden the education offer to encompass lifelong learning. A lifelong learning officer in every museum was suggested. Another respondent suggested 'after work' twilight informal learning sessions in the museum environment.

Views ranged widely on how a strong research culture could be built and sustained. It was suggested that the research had to relevant, subject to sector wide robust quality benchmarking, and have practical documented outcomes. It was specifically suggested that all museums should have a research publication policy to ensure wide dissemination of research findings and that research policies should be reported on in annual reports and targets set out in corporate plans. One respondent stated that museums needed to be more explicit in articulating the public benefits generated by research commissioned in museums, another that museums should promote themselves as places of academic debate.

In terms of the role that Government should play, the maintenance of dedicated funding provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) was seen as essential and there were calls for AHRC to expand its research remit. Several respondents also wanted Government to articulate clear expectations on research and give greater recognition to collection, exhibition and object based research as being core to the successful fulfilment of a museum’s public function. Detailed ideas on this theme included: Government developing a museums research strategy, or framework, to identify both work done to date and gaps; DCMS to provide match funding for AHRC research grants; research to be a key performance indicator for national museums; a clear statement of support for a greater diversity of research, that was not just limited to curators; a more proactive approach from the leading public bodies in the sector towards coordinating and enabling research projects; and further development of subject specific networks.

There was a similar broad list of suggestions on how stronger links could be created between Higher and Further Education sectors (HE and FE) and museums. Partnerships at the regional and local level were considered to be key, with individual museums and Renaissance Hub Partners working with local Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs), FE colleges and Universities.
Through closer working, museums could provide new learning opportunities and encourage young people to continue or re-enter formal education.

There was also an expectation that the creation of the AHRC would help foster a stronger relationship between HE and museum sectors, particularly in terms of research collaborations and recognition of academic excellence in museums. However, one respondent saw a need for a dedicated advocacy programme to raise awareness within HE and FE institutions of the possibilities offered by museum collections. Others suggested that the role of HE Research Officers could be expanded to provide a brokerage role for smaller museums seeking to share their expertise with HE and FE.

Museums also saw partnership benefits in terms of ICT product development, enhancing university teaching, pre-entry training and post-entry training for museum specialists and encouraging postgraduates to work on museum collections. There was a suggestion that some of the Strategic Commissioning partnerships with university museums could provide a model on which to build partnerships with Higher and Further Education more widely.

There was also need to develop networks, share best practice and break down institutional barriers where there was a mutual agenda. One respondent wanted to see secondments and sabbaticals to enable museum staff to become visiting lecturers for HE courses. Another wanted to see HE/FE professionals actively involved within museum organisations. A couple of respondents draw particular attention to institutional barriers for HE that stymied their greater collaboration with the museums sector (e.g. Research Assessment Exercise).
Chapter 4: Careers, Training and Leadership

Q6: How can the sector achieve the right balance of pre- and post-entry training to build skills for the range of their workforce?

Q7: What initiatives and targets would increase mobility, training and career progression for all types of museum professionals?

Q8: What must be done to secure a better representation of currently under-represented groups in the museum workforce and in the sector’s governance?

Replies from the sector set out a number of ways that museums could build skills for the totality of the workforce. Most tended to agree that museums had to increase investment in skills, particularly around project management, business and leadership skills, and curatorial specialisms. The emergence of the Sector Skills Council (SSC) Creative and Cultural Skills was seen as a positive development in terms of encouraging skills development in the workforce and the development of nationally recognised qualifications. Respondents encouraged the SSC to engage with HE to foster training that was more practical and ‘on the job’, with greater work experience opportunities and internships for undergraduates. The development of skill sharing days between museums was also mentioned.

In terms of mobility and career progression for museum professionals, pay and grading considerations featured strongly, with one respondent calling for museums to employ fewer personnel, but pay people more. Many responses suggested that museums should invest more in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and mid-career training to encourage staff to develop into new roles. There were calls for a more structured approach to career development, with support for secondments, work placements and mentoring opportunities both within and outside the sector. There were also calls for the reintroduction of the Sharing Museum Skills funding scheme to help foster CPD in the sector.

Museums need to properly assess the developmental needs of their staff through staff opinion surveys or other forms of research. A benchmarking exercise to look at the percentage spend on workforce development in museums, compared to other cultural sectors was suggested, as
there was a perception that the sector was under investing in new recruits and in CPD. All Museums achieving *Investors In People* accreditation was also mentioned, as well as calls for ring-fenced funding for staff development activity.

A number of replies commented on the unhelpful divisions they saw within the museum workforce, between personnel with roles centred on access or education, as against those with a more academic or curatorial focus. Specialists were quoted as feeling boxed in by their specialism. While education staff felt they did not have the same professional status as curators. One respondent also commented that there was a perception that promotion meant ‘going into management and away from the collections’ and another that promotion should be on merit, rather than long tenure in post. There were also comments that senior managers needed to strengthen their people skills to properly develop staff and develop multi-disciplinary working.

Respondents were in general agreement that more action was needed to secure better representation of currently under-represented groups in the sector’s governance. This also needed to be sustained over a long period. Current trustees, and those in senior positions, were considered not to reflect the UK’s economic, cultural or demographic diversity. It was felt that museums needed to properly engage in the diversity debate. Ideas included museums examining all that they do from the diversity standpoint (e.g. physical access) or developing sustained relationships with external organisations to challenge and change the image that museums currently projected. The representation of people from black, and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, disabled people and women at senior management levels, were all seen as very major challenges. One respondent argued that museums needed to consider becoming less intellectually elitist.

There was also a range of ideas on how museums might secure a better representation of currently under-represented groups in the workforce. These included positive action schemes, possibly working in partnership with HE and FE; coordinated sector representation at career fairs; targeted recruitment of potential employees from non-traditional backgrounds; and sector, or cross-cultural research into employment obstacles, particularly the low pay/low job status barrier.
Entry requirements for posts should also be examined as they tend to reinforce white middle class recruitment patterns, rather than widen the employee pool and encourage young talent to enter the museums profession.

In terms of BME communities, it was felt that museums needed to demonstrate the relevance of their collections if they were to gain future employees from these communities. Museums could also work more closely with BME parents and teachers, and encourage volunteering from these communities. There was also general appreciation that museums should be more proactive in calling for a wider choice of training entry routes to include apprenticeships, NVQ’s, and Foundation Degrees to enhance prospects for creating a more diverse workforce.
Chapter 5: Coherence and Advocacy

Q9: Would structural changes better support museums and provide effective means of ensuring a national strategy for museums?

Q10: How best do we combine more coherent and efficient delivery of museum services with a service that is responsive to the needs of local communities and users?

Replies were strongly in favour of a national strategy for museums that embraced the whole sector, and would help raise awareness of the value of museum activity, and explain what museums can do and what is expected of them. Many respondents thought that a national strategy would help the sector be a successful advocate for itself, building upon the 2004 Manifesto for Museums. Some respondents argued for a UK, as opposed to England only, strategy.

There was no consensus on whether the development of a national strategy necessitated a funding council to lead on implementation. In arguing for a national strategy, some respondents saw that it would require coherence in terms of both leadership and funding structures that amounted to a unitary funding council. Others respondents suggested that having a funding council would end the current piecemeal structure and allow funding disparities between museums to be examined. It would also improve the ability of the sector to engage with other cultural agencies and to lobby Government.

Others argued for the continuation of present funding arrangements on grounds that a funding council would be bureaucratic or expensive, would reduce the sense of managerial independence and responsibility, or that a successful model for a funding council could not currently be devised. A number of respondents were either non-committal, or said they would welcome further debate on how structural change would improve upon present levels of partnership working.
There were a range of views on how best to combine more coherent and efficient delivery of museum services with a service that is responsive to the needs of local communities and users. There were calls for a stable funding regime for local authority museums in order that they could properly deliver for their communities. The lack of funding for high quality market and audience research to underpin community consultation was a consistent response theme. There were concerns about how reliant museums are on project-by-project funding for community outreach work and the pressure that seeking external project funding puts on core budgets. It was argued that with sustainable funding, local museums could properly engage with the more challenging sectors of society, as well as the more traditional user groups.

The relationship between central and local Government was also remarked upon with some respondents commenting that national or regional strategies, funding and performance targets should not undermine the sense of community ownership that was so vital to local museums. There was a desire for an increased amount of trust and freedom for museums (e.g. Renaissance funding) so that museums and their local partners could target issues based on community driven strategies.

Some saw a need for a stronger sense of alignment between national and local government agendas and funding priorities if the sector was to demonstrate value for money. Others argued that alignment was not essential, but stronger partnership working across the sector was. One reply suggested that the education or health sectors should be looked at as models that have to be both responsive to local needs, as well as being nationally coherent.

Those that had experienced a greater share of Renaissance funding commented positively on how it was enabling them to develop services for their communities. While other respondents wanted to see a greater financial commitment to non-hub museums under Renaissance.

A handful of respondents took the opportunity to comment on the pros and cons of the trust governance model, compared against local authority governance control, and what this might mean for delivery in the short and longer terms.
Chapter 6: Partnership and Measuring Value

Q11: How can partnerships within the museums sector and with other sectors be better embedded?

Q12: What systems or methods should be used to assess quality and success in the museums sector?

Q13: What would you need to happen to make international strategic alliances possible between museums?

There were a number of suggestions on how partnerships within the sector could be better embedded. The majority of replies saw partnership working as core to any national museums strategy. Although there were concerns that to be truly effective, partnership working needed long-term funding support so that museums could share goals and resources more effectively at national, regional and local levels.

It was considered that Government could do more to encourage, recognise and reward museums that share their staff, expertise and collections, or help broker partnerships. One respondent suggested formally recognising the importance of partnership working in Public Service Agreements (PSAs) for national museums. Others commented positively about the DCMS/DfES Strategic Commissioning funding stream and the role of Museum Development Officers in terms of brokering partnerships.

There was support for cross-cultural partnership working, most notably with Arts Council England, The National Trust and English Heritage, plus a desire for collaborations with non-traditional partners to introduce new ways of thinking into the sector. However, many respondents highlighted the barriers they saw, including a lack of challenge funding incentives; lack of knowledge of the benefits that external partnerships could bring; and institutional accountability issues.
A number of systems or methods to assess quality and success were suggested that went beyond simply measuring visitor numbers. Respondents felt that an assessment of quality and success should focus on the quality of the visit experience and visitor satisfaction: whether the visitor found the museum/exhibition educational, engaging, culturally relevant, and sufficient to meet their individual needs.

There needed to be agreed systematic methods for collecting, recording and evaluating data, so that it could be used effectively to drive improvements. Some commented that they were working with partners to produce more reliable quantitative and qualitative data around visitor numbers, market research, economic impact and the impact on user groups of engaging with museums. Local authority linked respondents tended to want to see the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) reward Councils that provide good museum services, to help drive up local investment in museums as a non-statutory service.

In terms of assessing quality, a number of respondents were supportive of either a Peer Review model, or self evaluation against criteria that are validated by either a national or regional body. It was suggested that the Inspiring Learning for All (ILFA) model or the Museums Accreditation scheme could be further developed to provide standards and goals to work towards. An independent centre for quality assessment of museums was also suggested. Others wanted broader frameworks for measuring public value and social impact, and the Demos report on Capturing Cultural Value was mentioned in this regard.

A majority of respondents were in favour of museums having an international dimension to their work and wanted to develop partnerships with other institutions in Europe and internationally, based on mutual benefit. Some said they would welcome more strategic joined-up direction from central Government (DCMS, FCO, DfID, and British Council) on the role of museums in cultural diplomacy. Others saw a role for central Government in brokering contacts with international partners. One respondent commented that international partnerships tended to be very narrow in scope (e.g. are museums working with countries affected by transatlantic slavery).

Most saw barriers that stopped them from engaging with museums outside the UK. The availability of funding was an issue for nearly all. Other barriers included a lack of knowledge of European institutions, or experience in building international relationships, or insufficient
knowledge of the benefits and pitfalls of international collaborative working. There were calls for: a central information resource; best practice guidance on forming alliances and accessing funding streams; and more all round openness about existing partnerships. A number of replies advocated smaller regional museums utilising existing town twinning alliances to help broker contacts.
Chapter 7: Respondents

RESPONDENTS

Responses were received from the following. There was also a debate in the House of Lords on 9 June.

National Museums sponsored by DCMS etc
British Museum
Museum of London
Museum of Science & Industry
National Gallery
National Museums & Galleries Liverpool
National Maritime Museum
National Portrait Gallery
Natural History Museum
Tate Gallery
Victoria and Albert Museum
National Museum Directors Conference

Renaissance Regional Hub Museums
The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge
Leicester Museums Service
Tyne and Wear Museums
Bolton Museum MBC, Museums and Archives
Harris Museum and Art Gallery (Preston)
Manchester City Galleries (Manchester City Council)
Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester
Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester
University of Oxford Museum
South West Regional Museum Hub
Birmingham City Council
Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust
West Midlands Regional Museums Hub
Yorkshire Hub Museums

Other regional and local museums etc
Cambridgeshire Curators Panel
Ipswich Transport Museum
Association of Suffolk Museums
Design Museum
University College London
Royal Naval Museum/Mary Rose Trust, Portsmouth
Yorkshire and Humberside Federation of Museums and Art Galleries

Local and Regional Government
Mayor of London
Somerset County Council
Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council
Ipswich Borough Council
Salford City Council

Central Government and Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) etc
Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
Ministry of Defence
Arts Council England
Audit Commission
Heritage Lottery Fund
The British Council

Sector Bodies
South East Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (SEMLAC)
Museums Association
Association of Independent Museums
British Association of Friends of Museums
Cambridgeshire Museums Advisory Partnership Executive Committee
County Museum Development Officers in the East of England
Essex Museum Workers Group
First Division Association
The Forum for Museums in the East of England
Group for Education in Museums
Institute of Conservation
International Committee of Museums and Collections of Arms and Military History
MDA
National Art Collections Fund
National Trust
RESCUE – The British Archaeological Trust
Royal Historical Society
Society of Museum Archaeologists (SMA)
UK Museums Loans Service Network
Visual Arts and Galleries Association (VAGA)
Scottish Local Authority Museums

Other Interested Parties

Airport Expo
Stephanie Bennett
Contemporary Art Society
Rebecca Healey
Last Friday Mob
National Youth Agency
National Institute of Adult Continuing Education
Robert Thornhill
Tim Ambrose

Unless confidentiality was specifically requested, all responses to Understanding the Future are available on the DCMS website and can be accessed by clicking on to www.culture.gov.uk/museums_and_galleries