

Understanding the Future: Priorities for England's Museums

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The National Council on Archives (NCA) warmly welcomes the opportunity to comment on the priorities for England's museums over the next decade.

The National Council on Archives was established in 1988 to bring together the major bodies and organisations, including service providers, users, depositors and policy makers, across the UK concerned with archives and their use. It aims to develop consensus on matters of mutual concern and provide an authoritative common voice for the archival community.

The NCA would like to support the comments made by The National Archives, which is a member of the NCA Council. In addition we would like to make the following comments:

1. Museums will fulfil their potential as learning resources

Many museums have archive collections as well as their object collections. In some museums their archive holdings are estimated to be 80% of their entire collection. And yet this fact is not well known, even among experts.

NCA welcomes the emphasis on museums as learning resources of enormous potential. However, museums' object collections are made much more valuable as a learning resource when placed in their context and provenance using documentary evidence, i.e. when using archives. Together, the object and the records pertaining to it, are stronger as learning resources than the sum of their parts.

In many, though not all, museums there is not yet a culture of including the documentary supporting evidence when curating exhibitions and displays, even from their own collections. Indeed outside of the nationals and larger regional museums, archives within museums are lucky to have a dedicated professional caring for their particular needs. The NCA welcomes the view of the DCMS that museums have a great deal to offer to formal and informal learning. We hope that all concerned also realise what enormous potential the archives *within* museums are and that they are not presently being fully exploited or able to be exploited by museums themselves. An example of good practice is the National Maritime Museum, whose Learning and Outreach department now regularly involve their archive in creating learning and teaching packs for schools. These packs had been met with a lukewarm response from teachers until the enormous enthusiasm of the children themselves converted them to the belief that archive materials are both exciting learning tools and fun.

The NCA would like to suggest that museums are encouraged to gather archive materials for exhibitions from collections outside their own institution in the same way that they would source objects for loan. This would open up some innovative arenas for curation, educational interpretation and cross-domain working, providing a showcase for collections which may not have an exhibition space, which would harvest even greater returns on the DCMS' investment in our nation's cultural health.

All the points made above will naturally apply to academic and community collections, and academic and community learning and teaching as well.

2. Museums will embrace their role in fostering, exploring, celebrating and questioning the identities of diverse communities.

The NCA fully supports this priority. The NCA would urge the DCMS to share successful approaches to this priority with the DCLG's Commission on Integration and Cohesion, to which the NCA has also submitted evidence along with a number of other cultural bodies.

The NCA would like to see an emphasis on the sharing and celebration of community and group heritage. It is not only the content of such heritage that assists in fostering, exploring, celebrating and questioning the identities of diverse communities. For example, this year's Archive Awareness Campaign events, whose theme of *Freedom and Liberty* will celebrate a number of anniversaries significant to different groups for different reasons: Indian Independence and the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and the founding of Jamestown in Virginia to name but three. The process of mounting exciting one off exhibitions and the sustained interest needed to tackle day-to-day document conservation makes an invaluable contribution as well. This common respect for each other's identity, expressed through the preservation of archival heritage is a very powerful tool to building understanding and harmony between different groups.

3. Museums' collections will be more dynamic and better used.

The NCA particularly welcomes this and the fifth priority. We are concerned that publicly owned materials of such cultural and evidential value as the archives held in museums, which cover the whole gamut of UK society and experience, are not being dynamically used, nor are museums or archives able to collect significant materials of contemporary experience pertinent to the UK's diverse population. Often this is due to a lack of quite small amounts of money. It means that some sectors and communities are not represented within the cultural collections of the nation, not only for today, but forever, unless much larger sums of money can be found at some time in the future to enable retrospective collecting, but the NCA feels that this possibility is unrealistic. The choice must be taken now to collect and value all communities' heritage, or run the risk of some groups feeling unrepresented and neglected. It was to tackle some of these issues that the NCA set up www.communityarchives.org.uk to enable groups who undertake to preserve

their own record to share advice and good practice with each other and the wider heritage community. It is also why the Northamptonshire Black History Project was set up, to encourage the deposit of the local BME community's record with the local record office. Such activities as these show that 'official history' values the experience (historical and contemporary) of different groups, and increases the groups' sense of belonging, but much more must be done, and we support the DCMS' efforts to do so.

The assets of archives in museums, and pertaining to museums and their collections in other institutions, would repay a small investment many times over in bringing the additional value of interpretation, learning, self-discovery and cultural pride described above. Additionally, archive materials are more easily portable and cheaper to maintain than 3D objects for exhibitions, facsimile copies (made for handling or preservation purposes) are more available, and, if the artefact itself is of less importance to a particular purpose than the information it contains, the documents can be more easily digitised, web published and made accessible to a hugely larger audience.

We would like to point to the Young Cultural Creators scheme piloted by MLA London, which enables school groups to explore collections in museums, libraries and archives with a respected author or artist, and then to go on to create pieces of art, writing and other creative products themselves. This is a very good example of the whole collection being reinterpreted dynamically by talented individuals who share this sense of wonder and learning with young people, inspiring their learning and improving their quality of life.

4. Museums' workforces will be dynamic, highly skilled and representative.

Museums' workforces already are some of the most highly skilled people in the creative and cultural industries anywhere in the world. Many museums, libraries and archives proactively encourage candidates from all backgrounds to become a part of that workforce. For instance The National Archives run an assisted Positive Action Internship with the School of Library, Archive and Information Studies department at University College London. But in order to maintain the highest standards of professionalism, museums and other cultural bodies are limited by the field of candidates presented to them. We agree that there is much more that all bodies within the cultural sphere could do to make the workforce more representative of the communities we serve. This task would be made easier if more members of diverse communities were prepared to an acceptable standard before they leave formal education, or if greater resources for training internees were available, including the time of more experienced colleagues, who are overwhelmed with responsibilities within their institutions as it is.

It is a fact well known to the DCMS that the cultural and heritage workforce are highly skilled, extremely knowledgeable and passionate about their subjects and the collections in their care. It is also well known to DCMS that the reduction of funding available to the sector and the enormous pressures placed upon the workforce by successive governments are eroding these

experts' innate dynamism and motivation. Curators, librarians and archivists are well aware of the pressures upon the public purse, and do their utmost with the resources available to them. But it is breaking their heart and spirit to see original public heritage assets, some of them created long before they were born, and which, with good care and custodianship will last long after they are dead, decaying for the lack of a small amount of investment to save them. Once these assets are gone, they cannot be remade. They are gone.

It is also frustrating continually to have to justify one's skills, knowledge and ability to share these with others in economic terms. The NCA therefore warmly welcome the DCMS' understanding of the value of cultural heritage in terms of *intrinsic* public value as well as instrumental and institutional public value, and we would urge the DCMS to work with colleagues in other departments, particularly the DCLG, to encourage parent bodies of museums and cultural institutions, and particularly local government, to be joined-up and consistent and do the same.

5. Museums will work more closely with each other and partners outside the sector.

The NCA congratulates the DCMS on championing cross-institutional and cross-domain working which will open up cultural treasures currently not accessible, to all those working in the heritage sector and their audiences. It will also enable those from outside the heritage sector itself to become more involved with this valuable and rewarding endeavour as expressed in the DCMS' own statement of intent: to improve the quality of life for all.

In this area, the NCA has been particularly impressed by the *Art and Business* initiative, where skills from both disciplines are shared to mutual benefit. We would urge the DCMS to enable *Art and Business* to expand their activities rather than 'reinvent the wheel'.

The NCA welcomes all three sub-clauses of this priority. The development of a fully accepted and recognised evidence base that can be applied to all cultural institutions may sound an ambitious target, but we urge the DCMS and their partners (including NCA) to be aspiring and determined in pursuit of this important goal. We believe that DCMS does not need to start from scratch and that progress has already been made by groups such as the NCA to evaluate many areas of DCMS' remit. NCA's Community Archives Development Group has undertaken research into the social impact of community archives on individuals and communities; it would be encouraging to be able to submit this and other such research to a central monitoring and/or co-ordinating body for more scrutiny and eventual acceptance into a consistent framework, enabling such resources to be used by everyone within the UK heritage sector and internationally. NCA's Public Service Quality Group has, for ten years, carried out a national Survey of Visitors to UK Archives, and it is an international leader in such qualitative and quantitative research. We are now finding that archivists' groups in other countries such as Canada are beginning to consider how to carry out similar research, without knowing about the NCA's work. With DCMS co-ordinating the results

of such research, and able to fill any gaps, the UK would have a plainly visible evidence base and, even more importantly, a tested process for arriving at such an evidence base, which led global progress in this area. With 2012 Olympics fast approaching, this would be something to showcase when the world's eyes are upon us.

The NCA is well aware of how difficult it can be to establish and maintain long term sustained partnerships between institutions, whether they be national, regional and local institutions from different domains or any combination of these. But we are talking about cultural heritage that may have survived centuries or be expected to survive centuries more, and to be valued throughout these centuries for what they are and what they represent. The investment of a few decades of a curator's time seems small by comparison, and given political support, would be warmly welcomed by all heritage professionals. Some would say that the first step has to be a solemn undertaking of that political support, at least for the next decade. The NCA believes that the DCMS has indeed taken that first step with these three 'Understanding the Future' consultations, and we look forward to working with the DCMS, and our colleagues in the heritage and other sectors to continue this valuable work.