

# Sustainability and museums

**Have your say**



**MUSEUMS  
ASSOCIATION**

Sustainability means meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Museums also balance the interests of different generations. They serve today's society while aiming to pass on collections, information and knowledge to the future. For museums to thrive the Museums Association (MA) believes that they need to think more about sustainability.

This consultation document seeks to gather the opinions of our members. Please read this leaflet, attend one of our consultation events and discuss ideas with colleagues. Your views count and will help to shape future policy.

We look forward to receiving your views and comments by 1 September 2008  
Email: [sustainability@museumsassociation.org](mailto:sustainability@museumsassociation.org)

This leaflet is an extract from the full discussion paper, available at [www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability](http://www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability)

# Introduction

Addressing climate change is the most urgent aspect of sustainability, but sustainability also concerns the long-term role of museums and their relationships with communities. It is considered under three headings: environmental; economic; and social sustainability.

Museums could become more sustainable. They typically occupy energy-hungry buildings and have expanding collections. They often totally destroy old exhibitions and displays, replacing them with new ones. Many are overstretched and expected to achieve more on flat, or declining, funding. Quality of service and 'excellence' sometimes seem less important than visitor numbers.

Sustainability offers museums:

- new ways of interpreting collections and reaching audiences
- fresh approaches to old issues, including:
  - collections care
  - financial stability
  - relationships with local communities
- an opportunity to plan for the long term
- better use of all resources
- improved accountability and social responsibility
- opportunities for excellence, innovation and creativity
- a chance to provide community leadership.

This consultation is part of a programme of work to help museums think about their sustainability. It is being overseen by the MA Ethics Committee. We are considering producing a full report and action plan for 2009. Your views will count.

**Q1 Do you agree that museums need to think about sustainability? Are there important aspects of it that we have missed?**

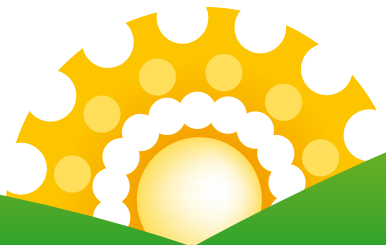
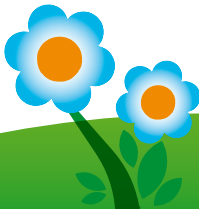
**Q2 What are the main difficulties your museum faces in becoming more sustainable?**

**Q3 How can the MA and other bodies working on behalf of the sector support change?**

► Read more about these ideas in the discussion paper at [www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability](http://www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability)

Please send your responses and other comments by 1 September 2008 to [sustainability@museumsassociation.org](mailto:sustainability@museumsassociation.org) or to the address on the back page.

You can find details of our consultation events on the back page.

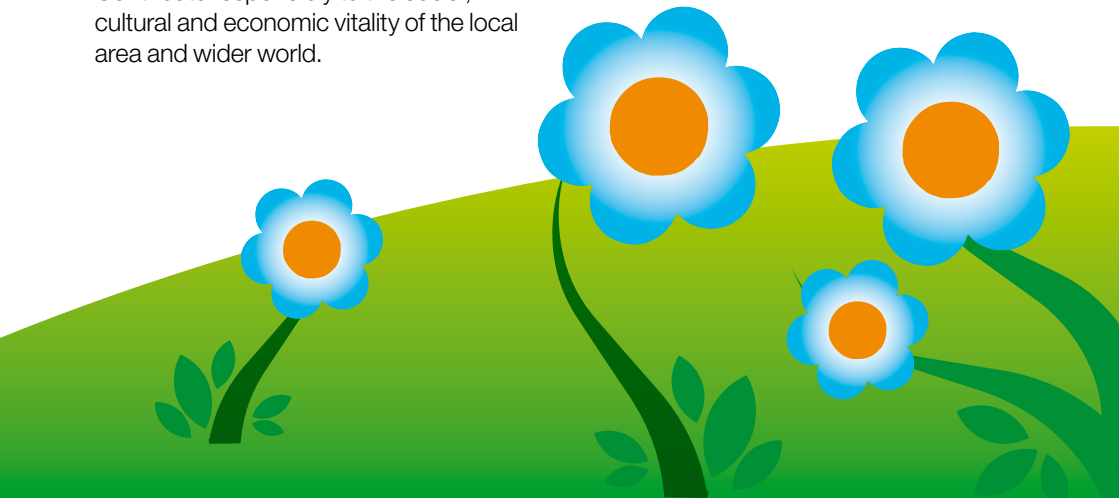


# Draft sustainability principles for museums

## To flourish sustainably, museums:

- 1 Value and protect natural and cultural environments and are sensitive to the impact of the museum and its visitors on them.
- 2 Strive for excellence, building deep long-term relationships with a range of audiences.
- 3 Acknowledge the legacy contributed by previous generations and pass on a better legacy of collections, information and knowledge to the next generation.
- 4 Manage collections well, so that they will be a valued asset for future generations, not a burden.
- 5 Make the best use of energy and other natural resources and minimise waste, setting targets and monitoring progress towards them.
- 6 Consider the potential for demonstrating and encouraging sustainable development.
- 7 Contribute responsibly to the social, cultural and economic vitality of the local area and wider world.
- 8 Develop staff, offer satisfying and rewarding employment and learn from their experience and that of others.
- 9 Respond to changing political, social, environmental and economic contexts and have a clear long-term purpose that reflects society's expectations of museums.
- 10 Plan long-term, take full account of sustainable development in all their activities and policies and work within available resources.
- 11 Join with other museums, and other organisations, in partnerships and mergers, where it is the best way of meeting their purpose in the long term.

**Q4 What changes would you suggest to these draft principles for sustainable museums? Which are the most important?**



# Economic sustainability: taking the long view

Most museums have been organisationally sustainable but some are now overstretched and financially weak. Uncertainty about funding often leads to short-term thinking. But to be sustainable museums require a long-term approach. They need a clear sense of purpose and to work within their resources. The sustainable answer may be to do less, but to do it better.

Economic sustainability may sometimes be best achieved by working in close partnerships with other museums or organisations, to share resources. It may be helpful to look beyond the survival of a particular museum to see whether its services might be better provided to society in different ways, such as by merger with a different organisation.

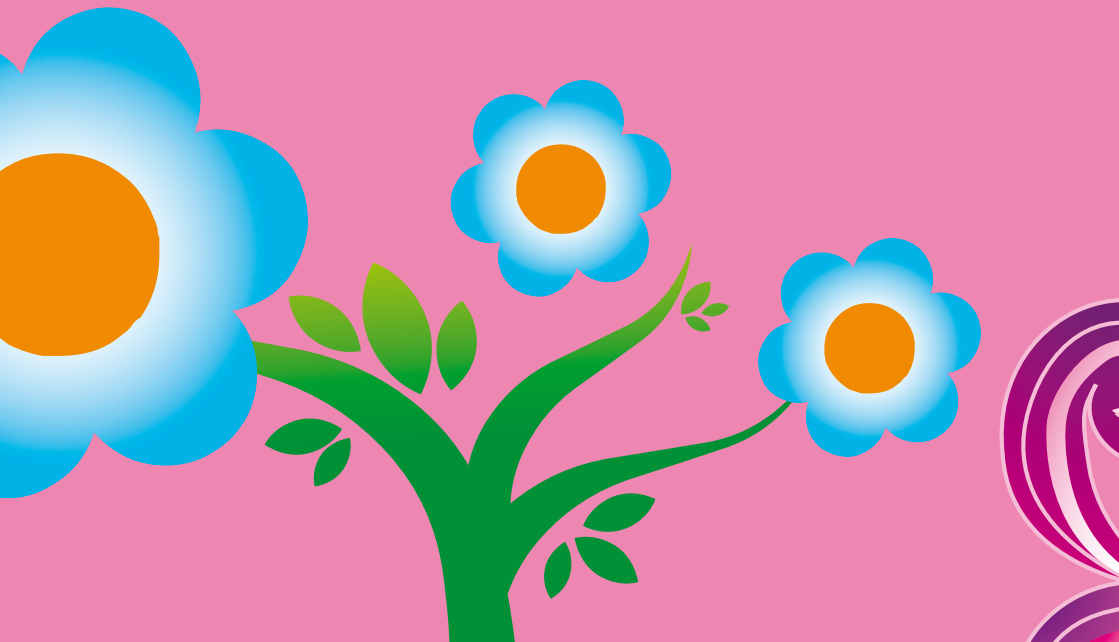
In the longer term there may be less funding available for museums. We may need to think seriously about what sort of museum sector might be funded from a smaller pot of money.

**Q5 Do you have examples of museums doing less, better?**

**Q6 How might better coordination, partnerships – and perhaps mergers – between museums make the sector more economically sustainable?**

► Read more about these ideas in the discussion paper at

**[www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability](http://www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability)**



# Environmental sustainability: going green

Many museums have energy-intensive approaches to caring for their collections. Air conditioning is often wrongly seen as a gold standard.

Using less energy is not only good for the environment, it can help museums save money. Museums should consider the environmental impact of other resources they consume, such as exhibition and building materials, water and paper, and reduce their waste.

Flexible loan and collection-care standards could have social, environmental and economic benefits as more objects could be made available to a wider range of people, using less energy and at lower cost.

Museums may also wish to offer more alternatives to visiting to cut down on visitors' car journeys or air travel.

**Q7 Do you think that collection-care, loan and government-indemnity standards should be reviewed or used more flexibly, with a view to reducing energy use?**

**Q8 How can your museum reduce its energy use? Do you monitor your energy use? What difficulties do you anticipate in reducing energy use?**

**Q9 How might you design or adapt museum buildings and exhibitions to reduce your environmental impact?**

**Q10 How might your museum change what it does to reduce the environmental impact made by you and your visitors?**



# Social sustainability: local and global communities

Museums engage with many communities and actively develop new audiences, considering the concerns of local people alongside those of experts. They can increase their social sustainability by deepening and diversifying their relationship with audiences. They should reflect the diversity of society in all that they do. In particular, they need to find ways to maintain relationships with new audiences beyond the limits of a short-term audience-development project.

Thinking about social sustainability has led people to question the role of museums. Some believe that operation as tourist-oriented visitor attractions is at the expense of a deeper social role.

Museums can aim to be socially responsible enterprises that have a positive impact on the lives of people who work for them, who provide services to them and who grow or manufacture the things they consume or sell on.

Museums could consider using local suppliers of goods and services and also may want to think internationally. How far does social responsibility extend: To using fair trade coffee in the cafe and selling fair trade goods in the shop? To supporting former colonies, from which cities or private benefactors derived their wealth?

**Q11** How does your museum aim to foster long-term relationships with audiences and communities? Does this conflict with acting as a visitor attraction?

**Q12** How could your museum be a socially responsible enterprise?

**Q13** How might your museum do more to contribute to and enhance the local economy?

**Q14** How far might your museum aim to meet international responsibilities?



## Sustainability as a museum message

A focus on sustainability can provide a topical and creative way of interpreting collections and sites. Possibilities include product life cycles, the historic effects of a changing climate, food production, or alternative, more sustainable lifestyles. Some collections can be used to research environmental change.

There is an argument that sustainability is such an important issue that museums should show leadership in their displays, exhibitions and programmes. However, at present, few – if any – UK museums appear to be devoting a substantial part of their programming to sustainability.

Some people think that museums should go further still and should become exemplars of sustainability, commissioning green buildings and aiming for the highest standards of operation. This is likely to mean fundamental changes in the way museums plan their development, use energy, consume resources and engage with audiences.

**Q15 Do you have examples of museums displaying, encouraging debate about, or researching aspects of sustainability?**

**Q16 Might museums devote resources and space to encouraging public understanding of sustainability? If so, is this a role for all museums? What could your museum do?**

**Q17 Might museums aim to be exemplars of sustainability, leading society and setting the highest standards? If so, what might it involve and what would help your museum achieve this?**

## Collections: an irreplaceable asset or an under-managed burden?

Museums spend a significant amount on storing and caring for collections to a high standard so that they will be available to future generations. Typically less than 10 per cent of a museum's collection is on display. To become sustainable museums need to become more mindful of why they are keeping the rest.

Some museums are assessing the importance of their collections and making active decisions about what should be retained for the long term, helped by new rules on disposal from the MA and accreditation.

**Q18 Does your museum know what it costs in money and energy to keep its existing collection? What about the long-term cost of adding to it?**

**Q19 How could your museum manage its collection more actively?**

**Q20 What criteria could help you decide what to keep and what to dispose of?**

Also of interest the MA Disposal toolkit [www.museumsassociation.org/disposal](http://www.museumsassociation.org/disposal)

► Read more about these ideas in the discussion paper at [www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability](http://www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability)

## Working sustainably: staff, skills and knowledge

For museums to be sustainable they need to make best use of all the resources available to them, including skills and knowledge, and the staff that embody them. Museums need to nurture and develop their staff to perform at their best.

As skills and knowledge will often be outside the organisation, the sector needs sustainable systems to share information about good practice. Museums need to be more systematic in succession planning – and managing collections-related knowledge in general. The sector needs to develop ways of making collections-related expertise available to museums without specialist staff and to develop new generations of collections specialists.

**Q21 How might the museum sector and its support organisations improve systems and processes for sharing good practice?**

**Q22 How might individual museums, and the sector, improve the approach to developing, managing and sharing collections-related knowledge?**

Also of interest Monument Fellowships from the MA [www.museumsassociation.org/monument](http://www.museumsassociation.org/monument)

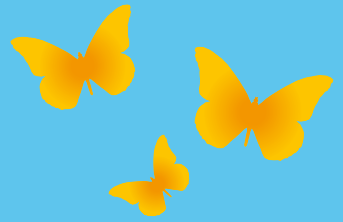
## Managing growth or going slow: is there a sustainable future?

From many points of view the UK museum sector seems in good health. The past generation has seen a growth in many areas of museums and their work. However some aspects of this growth may be weakening museums' sustainability. In new or expanded buildings cost per visit tends to increase, as does energy-use per visit.

If museums are to be sustainable they need to take a long-term view of all their resource use. They will need to take a holistic view of their work from economic, social and environmental points of view. An increasingly common approach to this is 'triple bottom-line accounting' in which an organisation plans, and reports on, its social and environmental impact, as well as its financial performance. However, it's not possible to 'balance' or trade off one against another, as the environment will eventually limit what can be achieved socially and economically.

Sustainability might imply a slower pace of change, something for which museums are sometimes criticised. But in many cases slowness might be a strength that enhances public trust.





Museums might move away from blockbuster exhibitions and spectacular renewal through dramatic once-in-a-generation redisplays to a more gradual, continual approach to changing and refreshing displays that is designed to encourage repeat visits by local audiences. This might mean less of a distinction between permanent galleries and temporary exhibitions.

They might aim to communicate more deeply with regular visitors, in higher-quality (but no larger) spaces, rather than chase tourists. It will be crucial to continue to develop new diverse audiences.

A sustainable museum sector might be one in which every time a museum opens or grows, another closes or shrinks. There could be fewer, better museums, aiming for excellence rather than growth. Any growth would have to be justifiable in social, economic and environmental terms.

To become sustainable, museums will need to become realistic and assertive about what they can and cannot deliver with available resources – and clearer about what society actually wants and needs from them.

**Q23** How could your museum focus more on excellence and less on quantity, while still diversifying audiences?

**Q24** Might museums – and the sector as a whole – aim for a ‘steady state’ in which visitor numbers are largely stable and requirements for funding and natural resources do not increase significantly?

**Q25** How likely are museums to be realistic and assertive about what they can and cannot deliver for their funding?

**Q26** How might your museum reduce the financial and energy cost of each visit?

**Q27** What targets might your museum set to ensure it becomes more sustainable?

**Q28** Are there ways in which your museum could grow sustainably?



Please email your responses to [sustainability@museumsassociation.org](mailto:sustainability@museumsassociation.org) by 1 September 2008 or send them to the address on the back page

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# Sustainability discussion workshops

Come to one of our free half-day discussion sessions. They will inspire you to think about the future direction of your museum and help you improve its environmental, economic and social sustainability. There will also be an opportunity to comment on the MA's discussion paper.

The workshops are free but space is limited and booking is essential.

Further venues nationwide will be confirmed, please see the website for more details.

For up-to-date details and full booking information please see

[www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability](http://www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability)

Compton Verney, Warwickshire	9 May
Carlisle	21 May
Belfast	30 May
Jersey	13 June
Leicester	16 June
Nottingham	17 June
Cardiff	20 June
Manchester	25 June
Newcastle	8 July
Glasgow	10 July
Edinburgh	11 July
Ruthin, North Wales	15 July
Weston-super-Mare, Somerset	22 July
Sheffield	25 July
London	29 July

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