

MUSEUMS
ASSOCIATION

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*MUSEUMS 2020
DISCUSSION
PAPER*

2020

MUSEUMS

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FOREWORD

The UK's museums are transforming the ways they engage with people. Participation and attendance numbers are up, buildings are refurbished, collections are better used and cared for. Now, there is increasing interest in the impacts museums can have – the difference they can make to individuals, to communities, to society and to the environment. Economic times may be challenging, but the Museums Association (MA) believes every museum now has the perfect opportunity to build on the investment and success of recent years and to increase its impact.

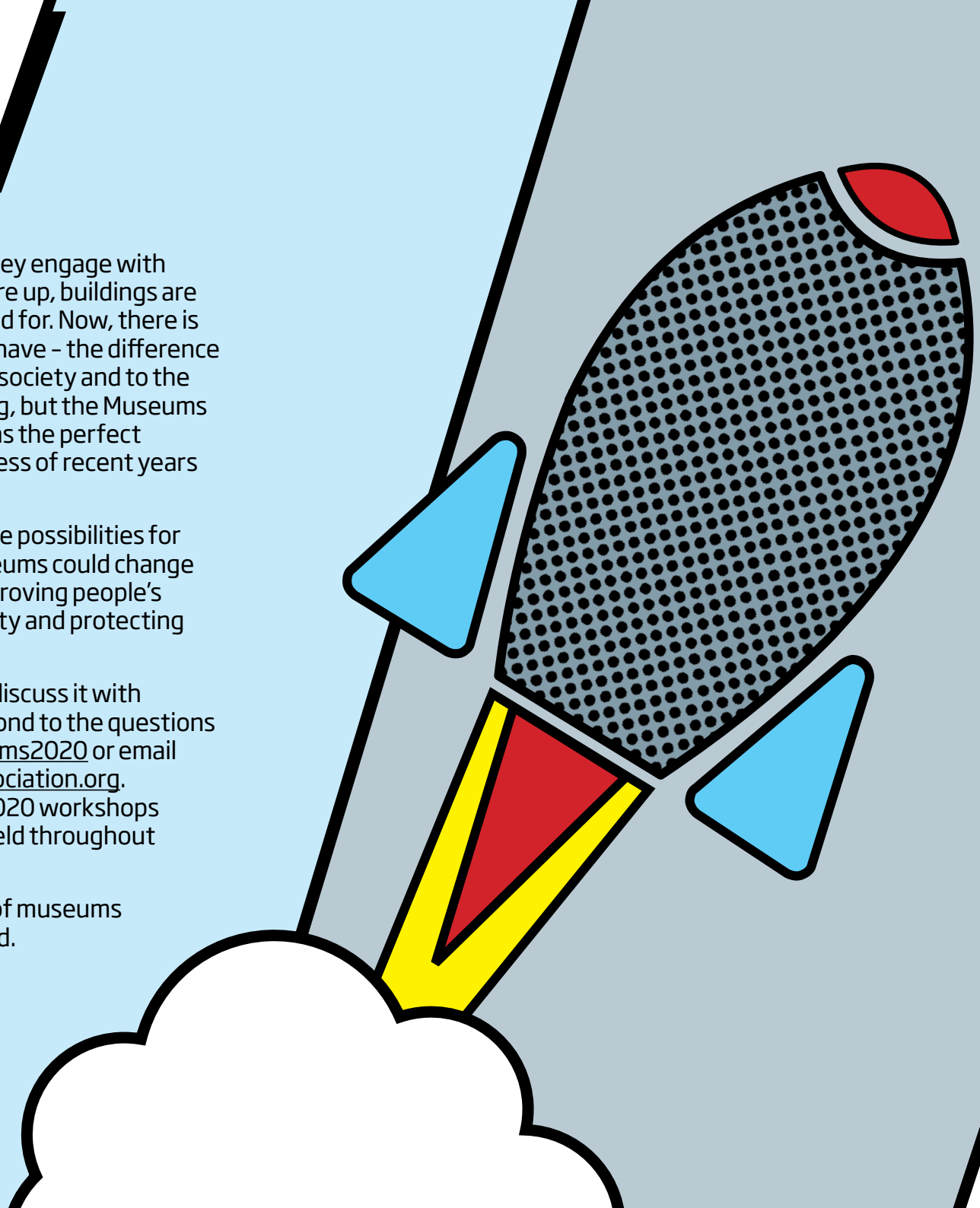
This Museums 2020 discussion paper sets out the possibilities for museums and seeks your views about how museums could change to better fulfil their potential to play a part in improving people's lives, building communities, strengthening society and protecting the environment.

Please read the paper, think about what it says, discuss it with colleagues and send us your views. You can respond to the questions online at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012. Museums 2020 workshops www.museumsassociation.org/events will be held throughout the UK in September and October 2012.

Your views will help shape the MA's 2020 vision of museums and their impact, so make sure your voice is heard.

VANESSA TREVELYAN

President, Museums Association



INTRODUCTION

Inspiring examples from the UK and throughout the world demonstrate that museums have the potential to build on their long tradition of caring for collections, knowledge and memories and to care more about individuals, communities, society and the environment. Museums can be so much more than buildings that interpret collections. Just for starters, they can help people “develop their identity, build confidence through volunteering, understand cultural differences, have non-partisan public spaces to enjoy, support intergenerational understanding, help recently arrived migrants learn a language/culture/history and find their place in it, give a place for a father to take his son/daughter on their one day a week/month together, inspire the next generation of scientists, provoke debate, build community cohesion, help prevent illnesses associated with old age, make people go ‘wow’, encourage tourism, promote economic growth through cultural regeneration, and let people learn through the power of touch”.¹

Every museum is different, with different audiences, communities and networks, with different collections, skills and knowledge, with different histories, buildings and funding. Every individual museum has varied audiences to serve – audiences that are becoming more and more diverse. And government policy is becoming increasingly varied in different parts of the UK. This discussion paper aims to tease out common themes that can apply to every museum. It makes a simple proposition: every museum can do more to improve people’s lives and play a part in meeting society’s needs.

People have shared experiences in museums and a sense of communal, social ownership of them. This means people love and trust museums. In principle they are “trusted by the public and able to present, interpret and discuss complex and sensitive issues, fostering tolerance and understanding.”² But many museums are cautious about actively and explicitly contributing to the creation of a civil and civilised society. The challenge is to move on from a generalised sense that a museum provides public benefit by merely existing, to identifying how it can best make a defined and explicit contribution. “Museums enjoy unparalleled respect and trust and it is time this veneration be put to good use.”³

For most museums this will mean becoming more aware of what’s going on around them, refreshing their role and purpose, focusing on the quality and depth of their engagement with people, constantly seeking out new opportunities and building new partnerships with an ever-wider range of organisations. For many people working for museums, it will mean acquiring and using new skills, working in new ways and collaborating with – and learning from – people with different skills, knowledge and experience.

This discussion paper invites you to take the first steps on that journey.

ANSWER at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012.

If you’re not involved directly in the work of a particular museum, you could think about a museum you know well or museums in general.

Q1

LOOKING BACK OVER THE PAST YEAR OR SO, HOW HAS YOUR MUSEUM MADE THE GREATEST DIFFERENCE TO INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES, SOCIETY OR THE ENVIRONMENT?

Q2

OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS, HOW MIGHT YOUR MUSEUM BUILD ON THAT, AND USE ITS REPUTATION AND RESOURCES TO MAKE A GREATER IMPACT?

THE WORLD NOW AND IN 2020

From some points of view, life has never been better than in the first few years of the 21st century. People are living longer; the internet and other technologies offer easy communication and new types of relationships. Many people's horizons are ever-widening, with increasing international links and growing diversity in many parts of the UK. For many, life is culturally and intellectually richer - increased participation in museums is an indicator of that.

However, many individuals and communities face striking problems, from homelessness and drug addiction to human trafficking and domestic violence; from the break-up of communities and growing inequality to rising obesity and increased mental illness. In the UK, declining incomes, increased prices and cuts in public spending are making things

tough for many people. The scourge of youth unemployment will cast a long shadow, condemning individuals, families and entire communities to long-term poverty and ill health, with high costs for society as a whole.

Over the next decade, people in the world's wealthier nations are likely to become unhealthier and materially poorer, although others will become richer, as inequality rises.⁴ The world faces climate change and resource depletion, mass migration of refugees and the suppression of political dissent. The Arab Spring brings many reasons for hope, but closer to home the European economy is in distress. It seems unwise to maintain old assumptions that economic growth will be the solution to our problems.

Looking ahead at the operating context for UK museums over the next five to 10 years, it seems unlikely that recent levels of public funding will return. This will inevitably reduce the amount of work museums can do and risks reducing their impact. It means museums have to "critically review their situation, rethink various aspects of their operations, programming and partnerships... Rather than simply reacting to what appears to be a looming crisis and trying to maintain previous operating models, this could be... a real turning point which makes museums fit for purpose.

"What will people want of their museums in 2020? What role can those institutions play in developing their places and constituencies? What will it take to achieve that?"⁵

*WHAT WILL
PEOPLE WANT OF
THEIR MUSEUMS
IN 2020?*

1

MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR INDIVIDUALS

Museums can improve individuals' lives in ways such as supporting learning, stimulating interaction with friends and family, and building skills and confidence. To do this, museums often work in partnership with other organisations. Museums can expand this work, finding ways to engage with people more deeply

The current UK definition of a museum says that museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment.⁶ And they do that better than ever before. No 21st-century museum could be satisfied with simply opening its doors and waiting for people to visit, however good its collection and displays.

Programmes like Collections for the Future and Effective Collections have transformed expectations about the ways people can benefit from collections.⁷ Museums now understand that collections are there to be used.

Museums offer thought-provoking, inspiring and enjoyable experiences to help people make meaning and better understand the world. They provide opportunities for contemplation, curiosity and creativity. They allow people to spend quality time together. "The sheer act of visiting the museum enhances social bonds with family and friends through the sharing of the museum experience and the sharing of personal and collective memories."⁸

"The potential of museums is immense, both in formal and informal learning"; "an alternative space for learning, where children and adults can step outside of their usual ways of acting and interacting."⁹ All museums know they are fundamentally there to support learning and to stimulate thought and reflection. And surely all museums also recognise they should be inclusive: constantly seeking out new audiences and engaging with the widest possible range of people. There are thousands of examples of museums broadening audiences, inspiring individuals and boosting learning.

And many museums go much further. Not content with simply meeting people's appetite for entertainment and education, they aim to stimulate change and "to affect [people's] current activities, opportunities and aspirations".¹⁰ Dozens, even hundreds, of UK museums build individuals' skills, often to increase their employability,¹¹ a critical contribution at a time of high unemployment. Museums provide a safe, supportive environment in which vulnerable people can build their confidence, through supported paid work or structured volunteering. There is a growth in museums serving people with health needs, such as those with dementia, fostering "a positive mood and social interaction for them and their carers".¹² One group of museums is developing a targeted programme to help address child poverty.¹³ There is, of course, an ethical and moral argument for this work – but there is also a strong economic argument: unemployment, poor health and crime have a vast financial cost to society and if museums can play even a small part in combating them, it will make a difference.

This type of "social work" is increasingly seen by museums as a core activity; some fund it from their core revenue budgets, on the grounds that every citizen has the right to museum services that meet their

interests and needs, "a belief in the entitlement of the whole of society to the benefits museums can provide, and a determination to take positive action to deliver that entitlement."¹⁴ Often, museums undertake this work in partnership with (and sometimes funded by) agencies such as adult care services, children's services, the probation service, the police or the NHS. Sometimes museums collaborate with community organisations dedicated to improving people's lives. Such partnerships are essential for sustainability and success; they generate new insights and learning.

Q3

OVER THE NEXT FIVE TO 10 YEARS, HOW CAN YOUR MUSEUM MAKE A GREATER DIFFERENCE TO INDIVIDUALS?

ANSWER at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012.

1A

WELLBEING AND HAPPINESS

Museums are well placed to improve individual wellbeing, improve quality of life and contribute to mental health

The coalition programme for government says: "The government believes that a vibrant cultural, media and sporting sector is crucial for our wellbeing and quality of life."¹⁵ The term "wellbeing" is used in varied ways. On one hand it can specifically refer to mental health – the Scottish government's national indicators include "mental wellbeing".¹⁶ Sometimes "wellbeing" refers to health in general, elsewhere it is synonymous with a more general sense of quality of life and happiness.

"Claims that the arts are good for individuals take many forms. The arts have been said to improve health, mental wellbeing, cognitive functioning, creative ability and academic performance."¹⁷ There is growing scientific evidence that "taking an active part in creative activities [has] a measurable impact on physical and mental wellbeing". More than that, there is some evidence that "simply visiting museums and art galleries, going to the cinema or live music events, or even reading books" means people live longer.¹⁸

The New Economics Foundation has reviewed scientific research to set out five ways to wellbeing – five things everyone should do regularly to enhance their wellbeing:¹⁹

- connect...with the people around you
- take notice... be curious, savour the moment, reflect on your experiences
- keep learning... try something new, rediscover an old interest
- give... do something nice for a friend or a stranger, volunteer your time
- be physically active...

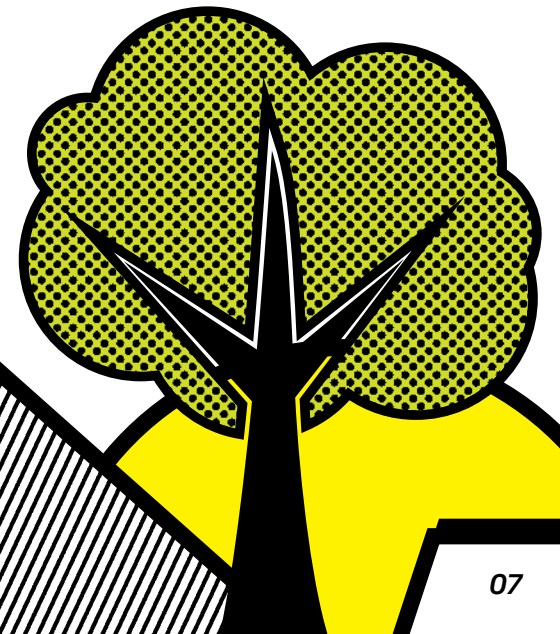
There is growing interest in the contribution museums can make to people's wellbeing. The Happy Museum Project is exploring how museums can explicitly contribute to individual wellbeing, which is intimately connected to a more sustainable future. It says: "Museums are well placed, but grasping the opportunity will require reimagining some key aspects of their role, both in terms of the kinds of experience they provide to their visitors and the way they relate to their collections, to their communities and to the pressing issues of the day."²⁰

Individual wellbeing is intimately linked with community: "Look out, as well as in. Seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding."²¹ The difference museums make to communities is examined in the next section.

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Q4

HOW COULD YOU BUILD IDEAS OF HAPPINESS, HEALTH AND WELLBEING INTO WHAT YOU DO IN YOUR MUSEUM?



2

MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR COMMUNITIES

Museums can strengthen communities by bringing people together, validating the experiences of particular groups and supporting community organisations. Most museums have more potential to become truly of their communities

Several types of communities have a stake in museums. A successful local museum will be an expression of the whole community in a geographically defined area – and that community will include smaller communities or groups. A more specialist museum will serve a community of interest – people with common interests (and might need to take care to avoid serving only a clique).

Some museum collections, such as those including world cultures, also have “communities of origin” overseas, descendants of people who originally made or used things now in UK collections. Many museums interact with more than one type of community; all museums strive to be good neighbours and have strong relationships with their local community.

Museums can “root communities, linking the past and the present with the future”.²² “In a fast-changing world, an understanding of where we are from as individuals, communities and nations and as humans is important and of course, museums, by displaying artefacts and telling us stories about ourselves and others, have a crucial role in continuity.”²³

Museums enhance understanding between communities, helping people to empathise with others. This might happen at a local level – or internationally, through, for example, twinning with a museum on another continent. “Museums provide a free space for exchange of experiences, for opportunities for shared understanding – for creating peace where otherwise conflict or misunderstanding may be on the horizon.”²⁴ This can include countering racism or sectarianism.

Some museums also help with reconciliation, often as sites of conscience, “dedicated to remembering past struggles and addressing their contemporary legacies.”²⁵

In his 2009 Reith lectures, Michael Sandel spoke of the importance of “places where citizens from different walks of life encounter one another”. He observed: “Institutions that once gathered people together and served as informal schools of civic virtue have become few and far between. [This] makes it difficult to cultivate the sense of community that democratic citizenship requires.”²⁶ Geoffrey Crossick has identified the need for a “people-based environment in which knowledge could be developed... what is needed is not a system to transfer from one party to another some knowledge that has already been produced, to transfer something that has already happened. But to create spaces in which something can happen.”²⁷

Museums can be “connectors” or act as a “contact zone”,²⁸ bringing people and groups together. They all have the potential to act as new versions of the town hall or market square – public spaces where many things happen. Museums host lectures, discussions, cultural events and even occasional singles’ nights – but there’s untapped potential to connect people.

Museums could take greater advantage of the growing passion for “stimulus, congregation and live experience... Attendances soar for live experiences year on year.”²⁹ Specialist museums can act as a national – or even international – focus for their subject, by holding conferences or assembling resources. They bring together specialists and connect them to a wider audience in ways that universities and other specialist institutions can find difficult.

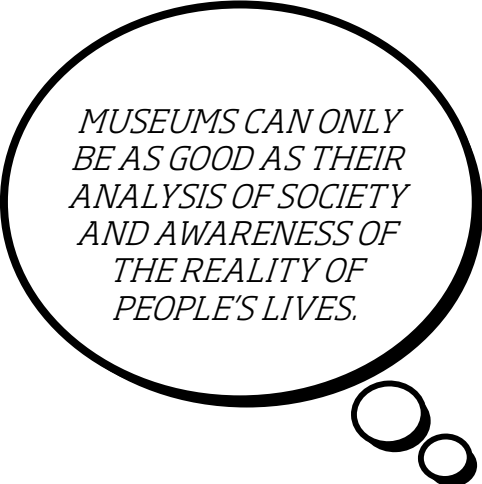
“Museums and galleries serve as focal points for communities and as inclusive spaces... They provide opportunities which help people explore issues of identity.”³⁰ “Through creating exhibitions and events with those groups most excluded from society... museums create feelings of belonging and social and cultural inclusion.”³¹ Museums help de-stigmatise mental health issues by presenting people’s experiences as a normal part of local life. Participants in a museum-led refugee project “felt that the exposure that their stories gained from being displayed publicly... was a public symbol of acceptance by British society”.³² (However, we shouldn’t be complacent – many groups remain marginalised in terms of their representation in museums and collections; there is still far more potential to adequately represent the variety of people who make up modern Britain.³³)

A museum can contribute to a sense of local pride and, perhaps more importantly, define local distinctiveness and so help to counterbalance the cultural effects of globalisation.³⁴ Many museums seek to play an explicit role in strengthening communities, perhaps offering their spaces for use by community groups or contributing their skills and resources to support and empower other community organisations. To serve communities well, museums work with other organisations in interdependent relationships, sensitive to the importance of equitable partnerships and taking care not to dominate.³⁵ The extent and quality of relationships with other organisations is a key indicator of a museum's sustainability.³⁶

Leading museums that have a thoroughgoing engagement with community development show that if a museum is to reach its full potential in serving its communities, it needs to make a significant commitment.³⁷ "Museums can only be as good as their analysis of society and awareness of the reality of people's lives."³⁸ But small things can make a difference too. Many museums help address problems in a community with programmes to provide purposeful activity for disaffected young people and build their sense of citizenship.

Museums can serve as a venue for groups to meet such as childminders or young parents with under-fives; they can go out and reach people in care homes or hospitals. They connect to their communities by offering opportunities to volunteer and increasingly see the benefits of recruiting and training people who live locally.

As well as being culturally and socially beneficial, these activities have an economic impact, potentially reducing costs on local authorities and public agencies. Some museums make an economic contribution by attracting tourists and directing custom to local businesses. To ensure high quality engagement, museums need to recognise the different needs and interests of local and tourist audiences.



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Locally, "communities help to build up collections. They often feel ownership of their local library and museum, which tells the story of their town and is part of local civic life. In many smaller museums and libraries it is the community response to the institutions that drives them and ensures their survival."³⁹ Some museums and communities are adopting new business models. Public agencies are commissioning museums to undertake work with communities and some museums see themselves as social enterprises; other models include community interest companies and museums directly supporting community businesses. In some (but unfortunately by no means all) cases, moves by local authority museums to trust status can increase community involvement.⁴⁰

However, most museums have more potential to become truly *of* their communities. As yet, few equally involve the breadth and range of their local communities. Despite plenty of projects to include marginalised groups, many remain unrepresented in museums' main displays and collections; some groups are less likely to engage with museums than others; and the workforce seems resistant to diversification, despite over a decade of schemes like the MA's Diversify initiative.⁴¹

To address this, some museums are increasing community participation and co-production.

Q5

*HOW CAN YOUR MUSEUM
BECOME CLOSER TO ITS
COMMUNITIES OVER THE
NEXT FIVE TO 10 YEARS?*

ANSWER at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012.



2A

PARTICIPATION

Museums are seeking ways to increase community participation in their activities and decision-making. Done with care, and avoiding tokenism, this can improve museums and benefit communities

"Democratic pluralism, shared authority and social justice are distinct but convergent areas of policy and practice that together define the socially responsible museum."⁴² Social justice is discussed below; here we focus on democratic pluralism and shared authority, or "participation", as it is coming to be known in the UK.

Participation is useful shorthand for opening up museums to a range of voices. At the simplest level, it's the event or exhibition organised with a community group, something that's now common practice in many museums. At the next level, it might encompass community advisory groups or exhibitions initiated by community groups.

At its most developed level, the museum is an integral part of its communities, with a range of people participating in making decisions about every aspect of its work and activities. Community members can be "co-researchers and co-producers of knowledge rather than informants and tellers of quaint stories of the past".⁴³

These museums are "embedded in their local communities.... Not treating their community partners as beneficiaries but as active partners".⁴⁴ Some museums collaborate with international "communities of origin"; this can lead to new approaches to cultural restitution as an alternative to repatriation.⁴⁵

Some people will not want to contribute, create, volunteer or join-in in any formal way, but will still have an expectation of participation. "For many people, simply attending a cultural event – be it a museum exhibition or an opera performance – is no longer enough. They want to be true participants, to contribute and respond to dialogue and to shape debate."⁴⁶ Participation can be seen as part of everyone's "cultural rights", which have been characterised for museums as every person having the right to:

"(1) Recognition of their own cultural identity; (2) engagement with other cultures; (3) participation in cultural activities; (4) opportunities for creativity; and (5) freedom of expression and critical judgment."⁴⁷

Participatory practice is sometimes seen as a threat to the role of a museum as a definitive source of knowledge and expertise and museums need to reconcile it with the public expectation that they are authoritative places for learning.⁴⁸ It can require considerable thought and determination when, for example, co-producers can't seemingly coexist, or when there are several versions of the truth within a locality. "Meeting the needs of competing parties is one of the most difficult issues that museums of the 21st-century encounter."⁴⁹ To navigate these areas museums need strong organisational values to guide them.⁵⁰

Done well, participation is good for both museums and communities. It enriches what museums offer and transforms communities and individuals from occasionally consulted consumers of

museum-created product to active participants, with "people taking responsibility for their museum or gallery, and gaining valuable experience of active citizenship in the process".⁵¹

"Where museums offer the chance for reciprocal relationships, where visitors are providers as well as receivers of knowledge and learning, they can engage the assets and resources of a community."⁵² Distinctions between "insiders" and "outsiders" can be comfortably blurred – in some museums, board members are also community members and museum volunteers. In general, community participation would increase "if volunteers were more involved in decision-making and higher-level activities, and if the profile of volunteers better reflected those of local communities".⁵³

The Paul Hamlyn Foundation's special initiative, Our Museum, aims to help museums move on from project-funded short-term participative work to "place community needs, values, aspirations and active collaboration at the core of their work, involve communities and individuals in core decision-making processes and play an effective role in developing community skills".⁵⁴ "This needs to be proactive work, getting out into the community and taking part, being seen, and doing work which addresses the community's agendas. Museums need to become confident enough to cede at least some authority to communities."⁵⁵

However, much current participatory practice has been described as "empowerment lite". "The actual experience of engagement and participation frequently revealed a level of control, risk-aversion and management by the organisations that served to undermine its impact and value for the target participants."⁵⁶ "Are we accommodating different points of view... in order to preserve our existence, or are we genuinely moving our practice?"⁵⁷

Q6

HOW COULD YOU BETTER INVOLVE PEOPLE AS PARTICIPANTS IN YOUR MUSEUM'S DISPLAYS, EXHIBITIONS, PROGRAMMES AND DECISION-MAKING?

ANSWER at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012.

ARE WE ACCOMMODATING DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW... IN ORDER TO PRESERVE OUR EXISTENCE, OR ARE WE GENUINELY MOVING OUR PRACTICE?

3

MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR SOCIETY

Museums safeguard and develop collections, create knowledge and contribute to cultural life

Museums see themselves as serving society. In the MA's definition of a museum, they "hold collections on behalf of society" and there is a very real (if not strictly legal) understanding that museums and their collections belong to everyone. Museums exercise "stewardship" or "guardianship" rather than acting as private owners of collections.⁵⁸ They have been highly successful – perhaps too successful – in preserving things that matter to society (or at least to the more powerful members of society). "There would be little or no material record of our mortal existence without the custodianship of museums." "Museums quite literally stabilise the important material culture of society."⁵⁹

*MUSEUMS QUITE
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Museums present whole areas of life and nature in displays and exhibitions, stimulating wide appreciation of both familiar and lesser-known aspects of art, history, science and, increasingly, life today. They draw attention to the local, national and international, and the links between them. They help people learn about different times and places and think about the future. They "capture the changing spirit and preoccupations of the time and contribute to those cumulative impacts that play a part in long-term social change and shifts in cultural attitudes".⁶⁰ In museums, "people enact, share and alter key elements of culture that shape the very operation, quality and experience of social life."⁶¹ "It may be said that memory is identity. At the very least it is an essential part of it... All societies have therefore devised systems and structures, objects and rituals to help them remember those things that are needed if the community is to be strong –

the individuals and the moments that have shaped the past, the beliefs and the habits which should determine the future. These monuments and aides-mémoires point not only to what we were, but to what we want to be."⁶²

Many people in museums warmly remember occasions when they hosted a large event with substantial attendance such as a festival, celebration or performance – or even a specialist convention or conference. These activities generate culture for society. But for many museums, such events – which can require significant resources – are exceptional.

In many cases (but by no means all) museum collections form the bedrock of museums' cultural activity. And museum collections are used by society in many other ways too: for educational loan, for a wide range of research from family history to cutting-edge science, and to enhance public and corporate spaces.

In principle, museum collections, like those in public libraries and archives, are available to everyone. Digitisation has substantially improved the availability of information about collections and there will be benefits in further digitisation in cases when it is designed to meet a clear audience demand. However, physical access remains limited and most museums have a long way to go to

provide straightforward access to their collections; few offer truly open storage. The precise purpose of many "reserve" collections remains unresolved. They may be putatively held for research, but as the MA has long observed, "a collection cannot be said to be in use if it simply sits in store for years at a time" and it appears many "research collections" are not extensively used by researchers.⁶³ To a limited degree, museums make loans from their stored collections, but many have erected barriers of bureaucracy and cost and are highly risk-averse, so the potential of sharing between museums (and with other venues) is largely unrealised.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, most museums do not behave in practice as if their collection is part of a "distributed national collection" easily available to share with other museums.

Over the past few years, encouraged by the MA, many museums have reviewed parts of their collections and undertaken careful disposal. Over the coming decades, most museums will have to answer hard questions about whether the public benefits of preserving collections justify the costs of money, energy and other resources. There are further difficult questions about the extent to which collecting is justifiable when many parts of existing collections are hardly used.⁶⁵

How many museums have adopted a strictly strategic approach to acquisition that links directly to key priorities by, for example, collecting to better represent a museum's current and future audiences? "I hope that we have finally expelled the practice of encyclopaedic collecting and that we're curating the intangible as well as the tangible heritage."⁶⁶ (Do UK museums *really* need to collect any more 18th-century watercolours or 19th-century machinery?)

As well as creating and holding collections, museums create, hold and share knowledge for society. Once the preserve of the lone expert, a new concept of museum research is emerging with the goal of "deepening knowledge and generating new insights to animate collections... Effective knowledge is essentially a process of learning - social, interactive and experiential... Sharing knowledge is not a 'download' of information from 'expert' to 'lay': it is dynamic and expansive, including 'how do we know?' as well as 'what do we know?' Effective sharing gives confidence to others: to ask open questions and interrogate assumptions."⁶⁷

Museums can foster a sense of enquiry and encourage a wide range of people to develop expertise and knowledge; there is great potential here, as seen in museums that offer easy-to-access study rooms for local history or specialist collections. Increasingly, the boundaries are dissolving between knowledge created within the organisation and other knowledge and expertise. Museums draw on, support and connect a wide range of people and can act as the focus of a "knowledge community" that is sometimes international in scope.

Specialist knowledge is a valued aspect of museums and increasingly that knowledge comes from a wide range of sources. Like the traditional media, museums are unlikely to adopt a completely "social", user-generated model like YouTube, Tumblr or Pinterest. The challenge is to find ways to share the creation of knowledge and benefit from user-generated content - and relate that to society's expectation of museums as reliable, trustworthy and authentic. There are a variety of models for museums to draw on: for Wikipedia, accuracy is central but everyone can contribute; newspaper websites combine authoritative articles with reader comments.

Museums hold collections, develop culture and create knowledge for society. Most aspire to be open to all of society - to bring people together for shared experiences, understanding and learning. And some museums are going further in their contribution to society. "All over the world, museums are generating a variety of offerings and approaches for serving as agents of wellbeing and vehicles for social change... Museums have aimed to influence public knowledge, attitudes and behaviour; deliver public health and welfare campaigns, reduce stigma and bias, empower citizens and communities and mobilise other forms of social action and change." Some museums seek to work with society, not just for it. They are engaging with the issues of greatest concern to society, as "an active supporter and vehicle of social change".⁶⁹

Q7

HOW CAN YOUR MUSEUM BETTER USE AND DEVELOP ITS COLLECTION AND THE CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE TO INCREASE ITS CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY AND TO CULTURAL LIFE?

ANSWER at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012.



3A

HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Museums have the potential to address the issues that matter most to society and to promote public debate and beneficial social change, rather than always assuming a position of neutrality

The government's Museum Strategy for Wales says: "Museums will contribute to living communities, promote the values of a fair and just society."⁷⁰ "Museums, like all social institutions, are embedded in society and have responsibilities to that society to meet its standards of justice."⁷¹ "There is increasing... interest in the potential for museums to take up an explicitly activist moral standpoint on human rights issues and to engage visitors in (frequently challenging) debates pertaining to social justice."⁷²

The term "social justice" is shorthand for "the idea of creating a society based on principles of equality, that values human rights and recognises the dignity of every human being".⁷³ The "social justice" museum "sees itself as an active agent, inspiring an increasingly democratic, thoughtful, creative and inclusive society through the aesthetic and intellectual power of objects... The values of universal human rights are embedded in its view of the world. Collecting, research and display are not undertaken for their own sake, but for human purposes which relate to wider societal objectives".⁷⁴ To address issues that matter to society, a museum cannot be "afraid of controversy, debate and opinion... it welcomes these and encourages varied reactions; it may even embrace political stances in a transparent manner".⁷⁵

The MA supports the view of The International Council of Museums' (ICOM) international committee on museum management (Intercom) that "it is a fundamental responsibility of museums, wherever possible, to be active in promoting diversity and human rights, respect and equality for people of all origins, beliefs and backgrounds" and that "museums have a fundamental responsibility to confront political issues, and to inspire and provoke public debate in the quest for freedom of speech, rather than attempt to maintain a safe and spurious neutrality".⁷⁶

"Given their high status in our communities, the participative nature of our engagement with them and the incredible diversity of their collections, museums offer a powerful and democratic way of expressing, sharing and shaping values. Their programmes can trigger reflection, generate empathy, create dialogue and foster new understanding. They can create an environment, and state of mind, directly conducive to the creation and development of new ideas which can challenge the status quo. They can help people build new capabilities and understand how to imagine a different way of being. Museums could harness these resources, much more intentionally than they currently do."⁷⁷

A few museums are explicitly "activist", aiming to use their position as trusted organisations to bring about socially beneficial change. One even employs a museum activist to help it be alert to contemporary issues that affect its local communities (many in rural areas, where there is isolation and a lack of real and virtual connectivity) and promote debate around them; another has a "campaign zone, to encourage visitors to take up human-rights causes".⁷⁸

"Museums should strive to play an even more active role in the civic realm, not just by existing as physical spaces or institutions but by pursuing mutual relationships with community groups, public sector agencies and private enterprises. They should exploit their role as places for encounters, use their collections and programmes to help frame discussions on pressing issues of the day or lead on local campaigns."⁷⁹

"Whilst museums have often operated in ways which exclude, marginalise and oppress, there is growing support (and evidence) for the idea that museums can contribute towards more just, equitable and fair societies."⁸⁰

"Human rights work in museums is experimental, potentially highly risky and relatively underexplored... Museums provide a space in which complex and contested rights can be explored... Museums mediate between and are influenced by diverse moral positions but they are also active in shaping them... Museums that highlight injustices and point to ways in which they might be overcome... can be understood as sites of moral activism that do not simply reflect and reinforce the consensus but actively seek to build public and political support for more progressive human rights values."⁸¹

Q8

WHAT POTENTIAL IS THERE FOR YOUR MUSEUM TO PROMOTE HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE?

ANSWER at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012.

HUMAN RIGHTS WORK IN MUSEUMS IS EXPERIMENTAL, POTENTIALLY HIGHLY RISKY AND RELATIVELY UNDEREXPLORED.



4

MAKING A DIFFERENCE TO THE ENVIRONMENT

Museums can aim to care for their locality and their environment, as well as for collections. They can reduce energy use by changing their attitude to collections care and focusing on local audiences. They can help people think about more sustainable ways of living

There is great potential for far stronger links between the preservation of collections (and historic buildings) and the protection of the natural environment. Some natural history museums play an active role in improving the condition of the environment.⁸² The National Trust has always been involved in nature conservation and more recently it has paid more attention to the social side of environmentalism; for example, by

providing allotments, some of them at historic properties, for local people to grow food.

"Stewardship means to assume... responsibility for the long-term care of public resources... the care of something that doesn't belong to you."⁸³ It's striking that museums' careful stewardship of collections hasn't often extended into explicitly caring about the natural environment, or even into the stewardship of their immediate surroundings.

Far from caring for the environment, some museum activity can be environmentally harmful. Museums are now aware of the need to reduce their energy use and there's a turn against air conditioning. A few museums are beginning to adopt a more nuanced, risk-based approach to collections preservation.⁸⁴ However, there still appears to be some resistance to adjusting expectations of museum environmental management to take account of the need to use less energy. Some museums continue to impose unreasonable and unnecessary loan requirements for the control of temperature and relative humidity that encourage borrowing museums to consume excessive amounts of energy. "There is no point in showcasing history to the world if it costs the earth."⁸⁵

In spite of growing understanding that conservation is the management of change,⁸⁶ the museum attitude to collections preservation still tends to be one of aiming to utterly minimise change to collections, and eliminate natural ageing and wear and tear, whatever the cost. Collections care often seems to *resist* the effects of the external natural environment, rather than trying to *adapt* to it. As Darwin demonstrated, it is the most adaptable that survive, not those incapable of adaptation and change.

The biggest area of museum energy use is probably visitor travel. Discouraging fuel-hungry travel is hard for museums that are in rural areas or attract a large international audience travelling by air. This is a great dilemma for many museums, as their funders often expect them to stimulate tourism, which is rarely environmentally sustainable. There is a growing literature that argues in favour of museums focusing more on a local audience and less on tourists. This can bring social as well as environmental benefits: "The desire for tourist income can take precedence over a commitment to social justice."⁸⁷ Will more museums have the courage, or ability, to step off the tourism treadmill?

Most environmental issues are, in fact, social ones – as most of the problems facing the environment are the result of human activity. A few (but only a few) museums promote environmental awareness. There is a growing view that society has to make a transition away from being driven by ever-increasing material consumption. "Museums have a real opportunity to imagine a positive future where we might consume less, be more mindful of our relationship with the natural environment, and create a kinder, gentler but no less interesting world."⁸⁸

Museums can show alternative ways of living, from the past or from non-Western cultures, and think beyond the day-to-day. "Humankind [needs] long-term perspective to counteract the short-term thinking which drives the marketplace, be it the focus on quarterly results... or the immediate gratification of consumerism. This... is the special realm of museums."⁸⁹ "Museums could have a role in reconnecting people with their inheritance, with the biological and physical world and the constraints of human life on this planet, consequently allowing people to make more informed judgments. Locally, they could also act as focus for social enterprises and local economic multipliers and for social cohesion. A major commitment to 'the future from our past' agenda could be very beneficial.

"This is not an agenda for five years but for five and 20 years."⁹⁰

Solutions to the world's environmental problems reside at a deep, cultural level and museums could choose to play a more explicit role in influencing people's values, attitudes and behaviour. Museums, arts and culture "can be harnessed to help us make the leap to a liveable world".⁹¹

Many models of a more sustainable future see an increased role for organisations such as museums: "Parks, recreation centres, sports facilities, libraries, museums, public transportation... these are the building blocks for a new vision of social participation."⁹² Museums help satisfy people's appetite for novelty and creativity, providing an alternative to environmentally damaging consumption. In any less consumerist society, there is likely to be increased demand for worthwhile experiences and "meaning making". Museums could choose to help people make the transition to a better future – and contribute to people's quality of life once we get there.

Q9

HOW CAN YOUR MUSEUM SUPPORT THE PROTECTION OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT, OR PROMOTE WAYS OF LIVING THAT ARE LESS DAMAGING TO THE ENVIRONMENT?

ANSWER at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012.



IMPLICATIONS

Museums can see it as their core business to make a difference to individuals, communities, society and the environment. This implies more focus on activity and programming, with more varied use of space and less unchanging "permanent" displays. Museums could take more risks and be more comfortable with controversy

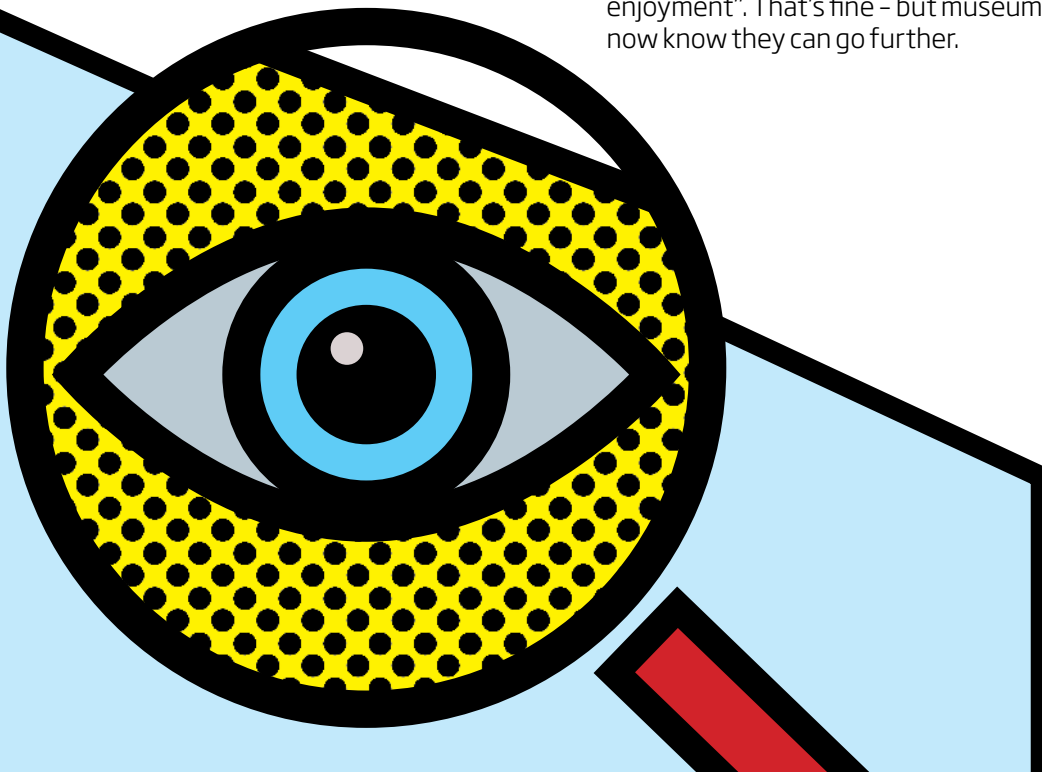
Museums of all types have vast potential to make a difference to individuals, communities, society and the environment. Yet in most museums, much of this work seems marginal, perhaps not core business. The MA believes that having a beneficial impact is the core business of museums. The activities of acquiring, preserving, managing, researching, interpreting and displaying collections are all a means to an end. In the MA's definition of a museum (now over a decade old), that end is enabling people to gain "inspiration, learning and enjoyment". That's fine - but museums now know they can go further.

"How do we expand our services so that we make museum assets into relevant programmes that reach all levels of the community and are rated by many more as essential to their needs and their aspirations for their children?"⁹³ The best museums offer a time and a place for many things and many people. A museum is more likely to engage people repeatedly if it devotes more resources to activities (and perhaps focuses a little less on capital development and behind-the-scenes work). The engaged museum could be seen as "a marketplace of ideas exposed through... performance, music, inscription, games, writing, discussions... to explore, in community, the different ways that memory might be activated... to create new forms of engagement".⁹⁴ "Think: inclusive, participative, accessible, critical, analytical, innovative... in the process as well as in the result."⁹⁵

The emerging themes in museum activity - themes that will grow as we head towards 2020 - are wellbeing, participation and social justice. These areas all imply more of a focus on programmes, events and ways of working and perhaps less emphasis on the hardware of museums - stores, refurbished buildings and permanent displays. They require museums to be flexible to respond to public interests. "Museum content [needs] to be in a constant state of change and renewal.

"Gone are the days when a museum could relax after a programme of capital works has delivered new displays that need not change for another generation. The modern museum has to work much harder to cover more ground."⁹⁶

After a decade and a half of lottery-fuelled reinstallations of "permanent" galleries, people are beginning to recognise there are limitations to that approach. "Once a new display opens it starts going out of date... To remain responsive a museum must be able to evolve over time... to respond to new discoveries and public interests."⁹⁷ Lavish new permanent displays in expensively refurbished buildings certainly have the potential to attract large numbers of visitors in the years immediately after opening, but in many (not all) cases do not by themselves engage enough long-term repeat local visitors. "It takes multi-millions to refresh a gallery and if you have to do the same thing every 10 years then this model will be unsustainable. We may need to consider semi-permanent or no permanent galleries [that] can be refreshed in smaller chunks within normal budgets."⁹⁸ Permanent displays "populated with glass boxes accompanied by passive labels telling museum people's stories... might be an obsolete medium". A redisplay can take many years to produce "and once open to the public [be left] to deteriorate slowly".⁹⁹




The best museum displays aim to simultaneously serve children of varied ages and adults from novice to expert. But museum display spaces tend to offer little beyond learning largely pre-determined things. Children's art carts and in-gallery handling sessions show there is far more potential for varied activity within displays. Museums could rethink the ways they allocate their space, with less occupied with fixed display and more available for a wider range of activities: for workshops, for short-term pop-up displays, for performances, for discussions, for people and groups to come together.

Perhaps museums' relatively informal social spaces and more formal display spaces could sometimes be combined together: art galleries as places to hang out, not just hang pictures. There may be lessons in the use of space in newer public libraries, such as Ideas Stores, where some of the reading material is available in the café; from the relatively informal cultural activity in the foyers of the concert halls and theatres on London's South Bank; from the many uses people are able to make of public parks; from festivals; and from informal learning spaces in universities.

Museums continue to need capital renewal, but this should be on the basis that their spaces will be able to flexibly encompass a wide range of functions and change easily to respond to changing needs.

Museums could also rethink the opening hours of their buildings to better suit people who work during the day. Those that charge could consider more nuanced pricing policies, perhaps varying through the day or week, so poorer local people are not always priced out.

Museum buildings and sites are a great public asset. But buildings can also be limiting; to reach wider audiences museums will expand the work they do offsite, into real and virtual communities. "Most museums will be broadcasting additional content via their online functions that isn't just a copy of their flesh-world programmes. At a local level there's great potential to deliver content with newspapers, community TV and radio."¹⁰⁰ Virtually, museum collections can exist simultaneously in many places; using the web and social media, there is great scope to take and connect collections to people who are already engaged with related subjects.



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Museums seem to have their greatest impacts when working closely and intensively with relatively small groups of people. Sustained, long-term work with a marginalised group might have greater impact than less intense work with greater numbers. Active, intense engagement will never be possible for most audiences but it should be possible to offer every visitor "a legitimate way to contribute to the institution, share with other people and feel like an engaged and respected participant".¹⁰¹

Museums are diverse and have diverse audiences. There are mixed views about the extent to which each museum should find a niche market. Aiming at a specific group may appear to make sense in business terms, but unless an eye is always kept on reaching a wide audience, a museum risks drifting into complacency, irrelevance and even elitism. "There must always be room for experimentation and programming for niche audiences.

"But managing for social justice means prioritising the needs of the many over the needs of the few, and it means taking our educational responsibilities very seriously... Our core audience is the general public - not our peers, not art critics, not academics, not politicians, not vested interests."¹⁰²

To make a greater difference, museums will "be more brave, less afraid of conflict or of tackling sensitive issues". Controversy could be a good thing: "Exhibitions that explore potentially sensitive topics and which manage to avoid major media controversies or which attract few or no complaints are frequently viewed internally as successful. However... institutions seeking to engender support for more progressive social norms might need to reconsider their approach to controversy. Taking up a position which seeks to reconfigure, or call into question, normative ideas about justice and fairness will inevitably generate conflict and provoke some groups to express their counter opinions. Controversy, although frequently painful, potentially damaging and difficult for institutions to manage, might need to be viewed as a necessary, valuable part of the human rights work that museums can accomplish."¹⁰⁴

Museums can take greater risks in the way they use and share collections.

Handling and lending rarely cause significant harm. Rather than aiming to eliminate deterioration and preserve collections "in perpetuity", museums can balance possible damage against the benefits that come from using things more and making them more easily available. New standards mean museums can think more carefully about how long and how well they want their collections to last."¹⁰⁵

Your museum can choose to make a far greater difference to individuals, communities, society and the environment. It might be more comfortable with the language of wellbeing, health and happiness; with that of participation and co-production; with that of rights, equality and justice; or with that of environmentalism and transition. To better meet the needs of people today and in 2020 it will certainly need to "welcome more, share more and control less".¹⁰⁶ As a useful checklist, every museum needs: "(1) A commitment in principle to redressing inequalities in cultural engagement; (2) acceptance that the population as a whole is as wise, clever and culturally experienced as museum professionals; (3) effective action to support more public learning and creativity; (4) participation and personalisation for priority groups in gallery development, collections work and public programmes; (5) extension

and distribution of services beyond the institution into social communities; (6) sustained investment in learning, research and evaluation; ...and (7) a refocusing of our thinking away from what we want to offer, towards what is needed for individual and community wellbeing."¹⁰⁷

Q10

HOW WILL YOUR MUSEUM MAKE A GREATER DIFFERENCE TO INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES, SOCIETY AND THE ENVIRONMENT? SHOULD THERE BE LESS EMPHASIS ON ATTRACTING INCREASING NUMBERS OF VISITORS TO PERMANENT DISPLAYS?

ANSWER at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012.

IMPLEMENTATION

People who work for museums will need to work differently and develop new skills. Museums could focus on quality of engagement and depth of impact, rather than on audience numbers alone. Museums need to reduce their fixed costs and could see using collections and buildings as more important than managing them

The MA's vision is that far more museums become responsive and socially engaged. This implies a shift away from museums as largely didactic, definitive and fixed, presenting expert information and narratives in unchanging "permanent" displays. Museums in 2020 will include many more voices, will share responsibility in varied partnerships, will house increasingly varied activities and will change constantly.

As noted above, this will require different uses of space. It will also raise different expectations of people who work for museums as paid staff, as volunteers or as board members. Creating museums fit for 2020 is a big task for museum leadership – but everyone can play a part in increasing museum impact. People who work for museums will be entrepreneurial, creative and collaborative. They will be reflective, learning from others and from evaluation, willing to share lessons from failures as well as successes. "Museums and galleries need to be more nimble-footed: to predict and be at the forefront of change, rather than trying (often failing) to catch up. A more diverse staff is a prerequisite for this, as is the development of external networks and partnerships."¹⁰⁸ Museums will work more inclusively, drawing on the ideas, creativity, knowledge and skills of a diverse range of people inside and outside the organisation.¹⁰⁹

"Museum professionals need to upgrade and update their skills, rethink research methods, rest the old-fashioned concepts of 'distanced experts' and be ready to become enfants terribles."¹¹⁰ People working for museums will continue the shift from being keepers to being sharers. Communication will continue to be key. "The need for constant content occasioned by the interests of the public [means curators having] a new focus on communicating what they know at an unfamiliar speed and encouraging an interaction with other content they do not control."¹¹¹

Museums will be flexible and adaptive, with lower fixed operating costs and more resources available for programming to respond to changing audience needs and interests. Museums might consider their priorities for seeking funding. Is it really best to seek lottery funding primarily for building and redisplay when it could be used to boost participation, engagement and learning? With perhaps more of an arts or community-work mindset, funding will increasingly support activity – the use and animation of a museum's assets of collections, buildings and knowledge, rather than the apparently never-ending management, refurbishment and administration of those assets.

It cannot any longer be sensible to increase the size of museum buildings in ways that increase long-term costs of core staffing, energy and other running costs. "All organisations must... think increasingly creatively about how to be more efficient and effective with the resources they have."¹¹²



"If we simply decline, shutting odd days, mothballing branches – a slow strangulation – then indeed we will have failed. We have to change our operational models for the future, although there is no single model – but the measure of success has to be about reach and impact rather than visitor numbers."¹¹³

Can we turn towards quality of engagement and away from seeing sheer numbers through the doors as the main indicator of achievement? "Success cannot only be measured by visitor numbers. What part do we play in continuing social inequalities?"

"Are we working to communities' agendas rather than communities working to ours?"¹¹⁴ If it is core business, museums need to value their people-focused work and make it at least as important as expensive redisplay and glossy exhibitions. "Community and outreach projects must gain the trappings of mainstream traditional projects, with catalogues, press views and openings."¹¹⁵

"In order to build their resilience, ensure their relevance and fulfil the potential of their responsibilities, museums will need to renew their missions, reconfigure their business models and revise their approach to money."¹¹⁶ Museums will want to refresh their purpose and values and plan long-term.

They implicitly make decisions with timescales of decades about collections care and the future of their buildings – but what are the long-term ambitions for improving impact?

Within a general expectation of increased impact and high quality engagement with wide audiences, funders and policy-makers will need to recognise that every museum is different and needs to find its own niche (or perhaps set of niches). "Each organisation's circumstances – and the nature of its communities – vary a great deal: there will never be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution."¹¹⁷ "Museums and galleries are potentially the most free and creative work environments on the planet... There are very few other workplaces which offer more opportunities for thinking, choosing and acting in ways that can blend personal satisfaction and growth with organisational goals. These opportunities constitute the true privilege of museum work and it is up to each museum worker to seize them."¹¹⁸

Each museum – and each individual who works for museums – has a choice about what to do. The MA believes that choice should be to engage actively with the interests and needs of individuals, communities, society and the environment.

*MUSEUMS AND
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ON THE PLANET.*

Q11

*IN 2020, IF THINGS GO WELL,
WHICH TWO OR THREE
IMPACTS SHOULD BE THE
MAIN FOCUS OF THE WORK
OF YOUR MUSEUM?*

Q12

*WHAT COULD BE THE MAIN
BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING
THOSE IMPACTS? HOW WILL
PEOPLE WHO WORK FOR
YOUR MUSEUM, AND ITS
FUNDERS, NEED TO THINK
AND ACT DIFFERENTLY?*

ANSWER at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012.

Q1

Looking back over the past year or so, how has your museum made the greatest difference to individuals, communities, society or the environment?

Q2

Over the next few years, how might your museum build on that, and use its reputation and resources to make a greater impact?

Q3

Over the next five to 10 years, how can your museum make a greater difference to individuals?

Q4

How could you build ideas of happiness, health and wellbeing into what you do in your museum?

Q5

How can your museum become closer to its communities over the next five to 10 years?

Q6

How could you better involve people as participants in your museum's displays, exhibitions, programmes and decision-making?

Q7

How can your museum better use and develop its collection and the creation of knowledge to increase its contribution to society and to cultural life?

Q8

What potential is there for your museum to promote human rights, equality and social justice?

Q9

How can your museum support the protection of the natural environment, or promote ways of living that are less damaging to the environment?

Q10

How will your museum make a greater difference to individuals, communities, society and the environment? Should there be less emphasis on attracting increasing numbers of visitors to permanent displays?

Q11

In 2020, if things go well, which two or three impacts should be the main focus of the work of your museum?

Q12

What could be the main barriers to achieving those impacts? How will people who work for your museum, and its funders, need to think and act differently?

We want your responses to the questions, and thoughts on other issues in this discussion paper. We'll take your views into account when we prepare the Museums 2020 vision of museums and their impacts. You can answer the questions, and comment in other ways, online at

www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020;
or email **museums2020@museumsassociation.org**

If you're not directly associated with a particular museum, you could think about a museum you know well, or museums in general. Please respond by 31 October 2012.

You can also attend a Museums 2020 workshop; they're being held throughout the UK in September and October 2012. Museums 2020 is also a theme at the Museums Association Annual Conference, which runs 8-9 November 2012 at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre.

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