

Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
7th floor, Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: Proposed new History National Curriculum

We the undersigned write to you on behalf of the members of the Association of Independent Museums, the National Museums Directors' Council, the British Army Museums, and the Museums Association. Together we represent the great majority of the museums in the UK. We write in order to draw your attention to an important issue that may by an unforeseen but very undesirable consequence of the proposed new History National Curriculum. For under the current proposals there will be a significant negative impact upon the learning experience of many young people.

The point is that this particular form of the new curriculum plan is in danger of excluding many primary school children from visiting a great museum or heritage site as part of their learning experience. Teachers decide where to take their pupils on the basis of proximity and relevance to the National Curriculum. (A recent study at the Victoria and Albert Museum revealed 81% of teachers say that curriculum relevance is the main reason for a visit). Under the proposed new curriculum all children up until the age of 11 will be taught almost nothing that happened after the year 1688. While some children will be in range of perhaps Roman ruins, or maybe a Tudor house, the majority of places that provide great learning experiences (e.g. some 75% of UK independent museums) are rooted in our rich and diverse history of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. These many places include for example the Imperial War Museum, London Transport Museum, the Ragged School Museum, Brunel's ss Great Britain, the D-Day Museum, the National Motor Museum, the RAF Museum, the Manchester Museum, the Royal Logistic Corps Museum at Camberley, or the Black Country Living Museum. School visits are made very predominantly to their local museums – For example 75% of school visits to Beamish are from local schools. Furthermore it is precisely this age group that is most accessible and receptive to museum visits. Secondary school timetables and teaching systems perforce reduce the number of out-of-classroom visits dramatically. Secondary school classes are simply unable to come out and visit nearly enough.

Inspiring education activities in historic places bring to life the stories of real people from our past, and are the excellent meat and drink provided by most of our museums and heritage sites around the UK. It has long been recognised by the Department for Education, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and the teaching profession that giving children real experiences in real historic places greatly stimulates the effectiveness and quality of their learning. Indeed the recent Henley Review of Cultural Education, commissioned by Government, reinforced that view and led to significant investment in a new Arts Council England Museums and Schools programme to give more young people the opportunity to visit and work with museum and heritage sites; the Heritage Lottery Fund has invested heavily in this area too.

This argument is not about the merits or otherwise of providing more of a chronological structure in the teaching of history, but rather the manner in which that may be done so that young people in Primary Schools are not harmed by being deprived of good out-of-classroom learning experiences. Restricting 18th, 19th and 20th century history to Secondary Schools only may well do exactly that. For example, some 73,000 pupils made educational visits to Ironbridge Gorge Museum in 2012. The vast majority were in KS1 or 2, and 89% were studying the Victorians, and the Industrial Revolution.

We urge you to adjust the proposals so that we do not exclude young people from these inspirational learning experiences by clinging to too rigid a curriculum proposal.

Furthermore, more recent events and more local stories are “history” to which younger children can most readily relate to, far more easily for them than some distant past. We all know that the past is another country, but please can we ensure that it doesn’t become entirely foreign for our youngest pupils simply because they can’t visit it and they can’t readily relate to it.

We shall of course be happy to contribute to future discussions to solve this problem and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew Tanner MBE, FRSA

Diane Lees FMA, FRSA

David Anderson OBE

Brigadier Colin Sibun

Chairman - Association of Independent Museums

Chairman - National Museum Directors’ Council

President – Museums Association

Director - Army Museums Ogilby Trust