

SEPTEMBER 2018

COLLECTIONS 2030

MUSEUMS
ASSOCIATION

DISCUSSION
PAPER

INTRODUCTION

Collections matter to people. The millions of objects held in museum collections across the UK can be sources of knowledge, pride, inspiration, controversy and opportunity to audiences, communities and researchers.

But we know that there is still huge untapped potential in our collections. Museums can do more to uncover the stories that they hold, broaden participation, and ensure their long-term relevance. Museums need to think strategically about how to manage and use their collections to deliver public benefit over the course of the next decade, and what policy and culture changes are required to make this a reality.

Collections 2030 is a major new research project that seeks to understand the current state of museum collections in the UK, and - in collaboration with the sector - identify how to make the most of museum collections over the course of the next decade.

This work builds on the findings of the recent Museums Taskforce convened by the Museums Association (MA)¹, the recommendations of reports, such as the Mendoza Review of Museums in England², the Welsh Expert Review of Local Museums³, the English Civic Museums Network think piece⁴, the Art Fund's Why Collect? report⁵, and the MA's Collections for the Future report⁶ from over a decade ago. In Collections 2030, we will identify the key priorities for the management and use of museum collections, and advocate for museums, funders and stakeholders to work together to ensure that they are acted upon. This discussion paper represents the first stage in this process. Following this consultation, a final paper with recommendations will be published.

The ideas set out in this paper are based on a range of interviews with over 40 museum professionals, volunteers, academics and museum users, carried out by MA staff during the spring of 2018, as well as a series of workshops held at MA Members' Meetings and MA Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund Network Days over the same period. The paper identifies themes and proposals from these interviews that will form the basis for a sector-wide discussion over the coming months.

How to participate in the Collections 2030 discussion

You can take part in the Collections 2030 discussion in a number of ways. The primary way to give your feedback is by responding in writing to the questions throughout this paper. You can reply as an individual or as an institution on the **MA website** by **clicking here**.

We particularly welcome institutional responses, and we encourage you to set up a meeting of relevant people within your museum or your stakeholder group to discuss the questions and ideas in the discussion paper and formulate a joint response.

"We welcome submissions from freelancers, policy-makers, funders, communities, members of the public and other stakeholders"

You don't have to work in a museum to participate. We welcome submissions from freelancers, policy-makers, funders, communities, members of the public and other stakeholders. Please consider how your own experience of museums relates to the questions.

We welcome online discussions of the issues raised in this paper, so keep the discussion going on social media using **#collections2030** and **#museums2018**.

The deadline for submissions is 23 November 2018.

References

1. Museums Taskforce Recommendations, 2018: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/news/28022018-museums-taskforce-calls-for-consistent-funding-levels>
2. Mendoza Review, 2017: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-mendoza-review-an-independent-review-of-museums-in-england>
3. Expert Review of Local Museum Provision in Wales 2015: <https://gov.wales/topics/culture-tourism-sport/museums-archives-libraries/museums/review/?lang=en>
4. The Future of Civic Museums - A Think Piece, 2018: https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/civic_museums_think_piece.pdf
5. David Cannadine, Why Collect?, 2018: <https://www.artfund.org/assets/downloads/why-collect-report.pdf>
6. Museums Association Collections for the Future, 2005: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/collections/9839>

INTRODUCTION

Where are we now? Collections and public benefit

All museums understand the special role of their collections and most see collecting and curating items for public benefit as one of their primary duties. Traditionally it has been sufficient for museums to collect, preserve, record and display their collections to fulfil the concept of 'public benefit'. But the idea of what that benefit is and how to deliver it has changed.

Museums increasingly interpret public benefit as requiring far greater participation with and understanding of the collections that they hold. They count on both internal expertise and the knowledge of museum users to enable different, more relevant and sometimes more critical approaches to the interpretation of collections.

Many museums have taken up this challenge by considering how their collections can work for people and help to deliver impacts beyond the walls of the museum.

The MA's Museums Change Lives campaign⁷ asks how museums can enhance health and wellbeing, create better places to live and work and stimulate reflection and debate, while the MA's Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund⁸ supports museums to open up and use collections in ways that have a demonstrable impact on people's lives.

At the same time, public funding pressures have led to changes in the way that collections are managed, with a general reduction in capacity and in specialist curatorial staff⁹ in some museums, and this too has implications for how museums are able to use their collections now and in the future.

Technological opportunities are also changing how we think about public benefit. The past twenty years has seen museums grapple with everything from apps to databases, allowing museums to reorganise collections and engage audiences in innovative new ways.

Many museums have experimented with digital technology, online collections and social media - with varying levels of success. But the digital sphere still represents a huge and exciting opportunity - and as audiences increasingly expect to be able to engage with collections digitally, it will be one of the key areas where museums can deliver public benefit in the years to come.

Perhaps the most significant shift in how we use of our collections lies in the changes that are occurring in society. Debates on transparency, freedom of speech, equality, social justice, environmental action and decolonisation resonate in our cultural institutions more loudly than ever, and have profound implications for the use, understanding, display, storage and retention of collections. Only by participating in these discussions can museums be relevant to and empower a wide range of users.

Q1

WHAT TYPE OF COLLECTIONS WORK SHOULD MUSEUMS PRIORITISE IN ORDER TO DELIVER PUBLIC BENEFIT OVER THE NEXT DECADE?

Q2

HOW CAN FUNDERS AND POLICY-MAKERS SUPPORT YOUR PRIORITY AREAS FOR COLLECTIONS?

References

7. Museums Change Lives: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives>
8. Museums Association Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/collections/18022011-esmee-fairbairn-collections-fund>
9. Museum in the UK Report 2017: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=1219029>

THEME 1: THE EMPOWERING COLLECTION

Museum collections have huge potential to empower people. In an era of social and political division; climate change and environmental degradation; and demographic change, many museums increasingly see their role as supporting activism, using their collections to inspire the public to action and to equip people with the facts and understanding that are relevant to their cause.

This role is all the more important given that museums are among the few institutions to retain a high degree of public trust in society. People listen to and care about the stories that museums can tell through their collections, and they understand the ethical responsibility of museums to provide accurate information about their collections.

Some argue that this public trust is dependent on museums' neutrality and their status as independent experts, and that to engage positively in current issues undermines that trust. However, it is widely acknowledged that museums are not neutral and that they and their collections are products of the opinion, prejudice and life experience of the collectors, curators, and funders that put them together. In the past, museums have been used for nation building, to bolster civic pride and as showcases for empire.

In the next decade museums can use their collections to empower people to be active participants in our society, giving them the insight and the tools to design solutions to contemporary problems, challenge injustice or simply bring people together. In doing so museums will also have to confront some of the criticisms levelled at their historic collections practice.

TELLING EMPOWERING STORIES

Museum collections are often assumed to be about the past, and to have little to say about the modern world. Some museums encourage this perception by focusing interpretation solely on the historical aspects of the collection. Yet our collections have much to tell us about our present and our future, and can be used to prompt museum audiences to raise questions about the world we live in today, to see issues in a new light or simply to inspire new interests.

In order to do this museums need to interrogate the stories that we tell with our collections. Are we telling the right stories for our time? How can collections create an emotional impact for our audiences? Many museums have already moved from a taxonomic towards a narrative approach with collections, linking individual items with universal or contemporary themes, and explicitly asking audiences to question where they fit in. For example the recently installed Destination Tyneside gallery¹⁰ at Newcastle's Discovery Museum asks audiences to identify with the stories of different migrants to the area throughout history and to place their stories in the context of current debates about migration.

References

10. Destination Tyneside: <https://discoverymuseum.org.uk/whats-on/destination-tyneside>

THEME 1: THE EMPOWERING COLLECTION

Museums also need to look critically at their own collections and consider the different narratives that they offer. In many cases they have found that relatively unassuming objects can take on real significance when viewed through a different lens. Partnerships with external organisations, artists, the public and researchers (including the valuable AHRC collaborative doctoral partnership programme¹¹) can help to shed new light on collections in ways that bring new facts and stories to the fore.

Leicester University has pioneered work in this area with projects such as Exceptional and Extraordinary, which invited artists, comedians and performers to reinterpret museums' medical collections to examine historic and contemporary attitudes to disability and difference. Leicester University has also recently partnered with the National Trust on the Prejudice and Pride project, which re-examined the collections at National Trust properties to uncover hidden LGBTQ+ histories.

At Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales, the recent partnership between the museum and local homelessness charity The Wallich aimed to empower service users by putting them in charge of decision-making for the exhibition Who Decides?¹² This type of participatory practice puts service users in the driving seat and encourages museums to be open to new interpretations of their collections, while also providing the public with an opportunity to engage with social issues through the museum's collection.

This re-examination of collections through new lenses should be a core part of the sector's work over the course of the next decade. We must be willing to look again at our collections and consider what new stories we can tell with them, and what new voices we can bring into our museums.

Q3

HOW CAN MUSEUMS USE THEIR COLLECTIONS TO EMPOWER PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES? WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN YOUR MUSEUM?

"We can and should tell many stories with our collections - but we also need to be clear about our responsibilities with regard to scientific fact."

Interview participant

References

11. AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships: <https://www.ahrc-cdp.org>
12. National Museum Wales, Who Decides? 2017: <https://museum.wales/cardiff/whatson/9683/Who-decides/>

THEME 1: THE EMPOWERING COLLECTION

USING COLLECTIONS FOR SOCIAL IMPACT

Many museums across the UK are thinking about their social impact and how they can make a difference working with their communities. They use their venues, collections and staff to enhance health and wellbeing, create better places for us to live, and provide space for debate and reflection, often with great success.

But in some quarters this work is still seen as separate from the work that museums do with their collections. In many larger museums a culture of siloed working still exists that artificially separates collections work from learning, outreach and audience development. It is easy for these positions to become entrenched and based on caricatures of museum practice – the ivory tower-dwelling academic vs the museum social worker. This split reflects negatively on the sector and diminishes the public benefit that museums can deliver.

In reality neither of these caricatures holds much bearing on practice. Museums are not just about preservation and study and nor are their staff social workers.

The work that we do with audiences and communities should have carefully considered goals and should draw on the collections and the knowledge that we have at our disposal.

Whatever impact museums seek to have working with audiences and communities, it will often stem from the collections that we hold and the stories that we can tell about them. Museum collections have always been powerful tools for engaging audiences: even in the digital age, people want to see the real thing, hear from an expert, and contribute to discussions about how collections should be used. Collections should be at the heart of delivering social impact; but for that to happen there needs to be a culture change in museums.

“Objects should be at the heart of conversations – the gallery is about people connecting with others via objects.”

Interview participant

This requires clear leadership and a sense of mission, accompanied by an ability for staff to work together and be open to the input of external partners.

There are many examples of this happening, such as the Multaka Oxford project. This collaboration between Pitt Rivers Museum and the Museum of the History of Science is funded by the MA's Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund and aims to enhance the understanding and use of the collections through developing work experience opportunities for community volunteers¹³.

It is also worth noting that this work is often reliant on short-term project funding that may not result in organisational change or provide a long-term legacy. Museums and funding bodies need to work together to overcome this problem and ensure that successful programmes are embedded in the museum's work and their lessons are shared widely with the rest of the sector.

“We need to be open to a broad range of ways in which collections can have an impact – not just health and wellbeing and placemaking.”

Interview participant

Q4

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE WITHIN MUSEUMS TO ENABLE COLLECTIONS TO BE USED FOR SOCIAL IMPACT?

Q5

HOW CAN MUSEUMS MAKE THE MOST OF THEIR COLLECTIONS IN AN ERA OF SHORT-TERM PROJECT WORK?

Reference

13. Multaka Oxford Project website: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/multaka-oxford>

THEME 1: THE EMPOWERING COLLECTION

DECOLONISING COLLECTIONS

As museums interrogate the stories that they tell, they are often confronted by the biases and prejudices inherent in collections – ranging from terminology that we would not use today to items that were collected under duress or in situations that would be considered unethical today.

Museums have long faced criticism for holding colonial and other controversial items in their collections, including some very high-profile items. But these debates have entered new territory in recent years as activists have brought ideas about cultural appropriation, and the decolonisation of museums to the fore of popular culture, including in major Hollywood films¹⁴.

These interventions raise questions for museums today. Should contested items be on display? Who has the right to interpret them? Should some items be returned to their countries or societies of origin? Is it possible or desirable to decolonise museums? The next decade is likely to see the continuation of many of these debates.

Museums must engage with these issues if they are to retain public trust and deliver public benefit. Birmingham Museum's co-curated The Past Is Now exhibition¹⁵ is one of the first such exhibitions to attempt to do this. It highlighted how the city's development is intricately linked to colonialism and how the museum's collection is not equipped to tell this story. The exhibition demonstrated the need to be honest and transparent about the collection, its provenance, and its gaps. It also showed how inclusive decision-making about collections can be an important step in empowering communities and democratising our museums.

Repatriation remains a crucial issue, as the French government prepares new recommendations on repatriation of museums objects to former colonies. We should also learn from the many successful restitution cases from UK collections which go unreported. The University of Aberdeen Museums has worked hard to identify items in its collections that originate with Native American and First Nation groups and has actively sought to engage descendants in discussions about the future of these items, with several important pieces being returned to their place or group of origin.

Q6

WHAT APPROACHES ARE NEEDED TO DECOLONISE COLLECTIONS OVER THE NEXT DECADE? WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN YOUR MUSEUM?

"We do have to engage properly with the postcolonial critique of museums. Real authority is shifting to source communities – so what role for museums and their collections?"

Interview participant

References

14. See for example Black Panther (2018)

15. The Past is Now, Birmingham Museums Trust: <http://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/blog/posts/the-past-is-now-the-exhibition-is-open>

THEME 2: THE RELEVANT COLLECTION

Museums are often encouraged to be more relevant, most recently in the Museums Taskforce recommendations, which states that museums should “clearly communicate their relevance to the communities and audiences that they serve.”¹⁶

Most museums have successfully turned themselves into welcoming public organisations over the past few decades, but are they and their collections relevant?

Relevance can feel like a constantly moving target for museums – a requirement to stay on top of the latest trends, cultural moments or technological advances in order to be where the public is. But relevance is a relative concept.

It means asking: who are you relevant to? The answer to this question will differ depending on local communities, who visits and who doesn't visit, as well as thinking about the collection and the way in which it has been interpreted, used or displayed. Relevance can mean reflecting the latest trend or hot topic in the news, but it also means considering how an object or collection can be meaningful to a particular person, group, or community at a given moment in time.

The challenge for museums over the course of the next decade is to listen to audiences, users and stakeholders to understand how collections can be relevant and what story they can tell. We need to allow for new and critical public reinterpretations of collections, and to think imaginatively about how to broaden the range of people to whom collections can be meaningful.

CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING

Contemporary collecting in museums is widely viewed as being at a low ebb. Budgets for collecting are non-existent in many organisations and many collect on a limited and reactive basis. We collect only what is given to us by donors or allocated to us through schemes such as Acceptance-in-Lieu. There are some exceptions to this trend: archaeological collections are expanding at a rapid rate and some natural history collections continue to grow, driven by the requirements of time-series collecting. Museums are also behind the curve in terms of collecting 'born digital' work and preserving digitally recorded oral histories. There is an urgent need for collecting in this area to learn from other sectors such as archives and to work together to overcome format and naming convention issues.

There is a real risk of stasis in our collections if we fail to collect the present and use this material in our work with the public. However the current situation also provides an opportunity for the sector. Traditionally collecting has been carried out by museum staff with little public input. This is logical in some disciplines, but many collections would benefit from greater participation from the communities that they serve. Collecting with others can breathe new life into a collection, giving it a new strategic direction, new stories to tell and making a museum more valued by diverse audiences.

Reference

16. Museums Taskforce Recommendations, 2018: <https://www.museumsassociation.org/news/28022018-museums-taskforce-calls-for-consistent-funding-levels>

THEME 2: THE RELEVANT COLLECTION

Public involvement in collecting can take many forms, from the public consultation on a new collections acquisitions carried out at Doncaster Museum, to the collection by many museums of protest material from activist groups during the Women's Marches of 2017 and other movements of recent years. This approach can form part of a genuinely dynamic approach to collections management, including regular rationalisation of collections, which is discussed further in the 'Dynamic collection' section below.

In some museums staff are taking active steps to increase the representation of particular groups or communities in their collections. This approach involves working with targeted groups to collect strategically in order to make the collection more relevant to those groups.

"Our new collection development policy moves us away from traditional areas and towards collecting that enables discussion or reflection about a contemporary topic that affects local people."

Interview participant

Several museums have actively committed to increasing the representation of women artists in this way, and it appears that this affirmative action approach is likely to grow over the course of the next decade.

Q7 *HOW CAN WE ACHIEVE THE BEST BALANCE BETWEEN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL INPUT IN CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING?*

Q8 *HOW CAN MUSEUMS CONTINUE TO COLLECT IN AN ERA OF REDUCED FUNDING?*

BEYOND DISPLAY - TAKING RISKS WITH COLLECTIONS

Displaying collections in permanent and temporary galleries is a key activity for museums and is how most visitors expect to experience the museum. But if we are to increase awareness and use of our collections by those who are less likely to visit the museum, we need to think about how to engage people with collections both inside and outside of the museum space. The recent Open Up project to diversify museum audiences¹⁷ highlighted the importance of getting out into communities and sharing ownership of collections - and challenges more museums to do this kind of work.

Museums have long experimented with taking collections to communities. The National Galleries of Scotland sent the iconic Monarch of the Glen painting on tour around Scotland in 2017/18, providing the public with the opportunity to engage with a major new acquisition and the issues that it raises far from its permanent home in Edinburgh.

Reference

17. Open Up Museums, 2018: <http://www.openupmuseums.com/>

THEME 2: THE RELEVANT COLLECTION

"In order to do more and better, we need to get everyone working together rather than being confined to the silos which exist in our organisations. We can do more to empower and equip the workforce to have courage to take more risks and work better with the communities we work for."

Interview participant

Elsewhere museums have been doing more experimental work with collections outside the gallery. Derby Museums have used the human-centred design concept in their new World Cultures project. They took objects from the collection on 'object walks', placing them in different locations and contexts in the city and using this as an opportunity to prompt conversation, discussion, feedback and to engage a non-self-selecting group to provide input into the final use of the collection.

This practice can work online as well. Museums are increasingly using memes, games and other online devices to drive interest in the collection - often in a fun, irreverent way that is a departure from the traditional tone adopted by museums.

This type of practice elevates the stories that collections can tell and the human responses that they can provoke. It often has a profound impact and brings a sense of fun even to items which have serious stories behind them. However such work is still regarded as being risky by many in the sector. Most of the rules and standards that museums have in place to protect and preserve collections limit (or are perceived to limit) what can happen to collections outside of the gallery setting.

The sector is generally still extremely risk-averse in relation to collections. Many fear that if something goes wrong they will be blamed and Accreditation could be put at risk, or the museum will be judged to have behaved unethically. This is compounded by the fact that items are generally all treated as having the same value - perhaps with the exception of handling collections - and therefore requiring preservation at all costs.

Over the course of the next decade museums need to adopt a more nuanced approach to preservation and risk, which weighs the public benefit of using collection items both inside and outside of the museum space against preservation requirements. This culture change requires clear leadership: trustees - including elected officials - and senior management need to fully understand the mission of the museum beyond preservation and need to take steps to reduce the siloed working arrangements that encourage a risk-averse approach.

"Museums need to have fun with the collection and remember our work doesn't need to be highbrow"

Interview participant

Q9

HOW CAN MUSEUMS TAKE MORE RISKS WITH COLLECTIONS? WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN YOUR MUSEUM?

THEME 3: THE DYNAMIC COLLECTION

To develop empowering and relevant collections we need to understand what we have. Many museums – particularly those with large collections built up over decades or centuries – are unable to fully account for what they hold.

Our collections information is often inadequate and not ready for the digital age. Our stores are full and valuable resources are wasted on items that don't fit with current collections policies or are duplicated in collections elsewhere. Furthermore, museums are regularly criticised in the press for the practice of keeping the vast majority of collections 'hidden in storage.'

Museums need to confront these issues. We need to consider the entire collections life-cycle – collection, conservation, research, use and disposal – as part of one process. The Mendoza Review of Museums in England urges museums to adopt an approach of "Dynamic Collections Curation and Management."¹⁸ Yet it leaves open the question of how to make this a reality.

The next decade will provide many opportunities to make collections more dynamic. A combination of technological innovation, increasing curatorial confidence, partnerships and increased use of public input can ensure that collections management is both *efficient and impactful* and gives people a real stake in the future of collections.

MANAGING COLLECTIONS KNOWLEDGE

Understanding collections is one of the key tasks of a museum. We need to be in a position to be transparent about collections, so that staff and the public can know what is on display, in storage, or on loan and how they can access objects and information.

However, museums have been working to understand, document and digitise collections for decades in what sometimes seems like a Sisyphean task for small teams of professionals. It also occurs in a way that tends to exclude input from anyone other than museum staff. Does this approach always serve the public?

Managing a museum's knowledge is not only about what is held on file. It is fundamentally about who holds knowledge about the collection.

Many in the sector still look back to a perceived golden age of expert curators who stayed in post for a lifetime and amassed huge in-depth knowledge about a collection. This model – to the extent that it ever existed – is dying out. Budget cuts and an increasing focus on other areas of museum activity mean that curators increasingly have to take responsibility for broad collections and have skills that go beyond a particular specialism. New approaches to managing collections knowledge are needed which make the most of both museum expertise and external knowledge working together in dialogue.

Reference

18. Mendoza Review, 2017: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-mendoza-review-an-independent-review-of-museums-in-england>

THEME 3: THE DYNAMIC COLLECTION

“The curator as a job for life with encyclopaedic knowledge of the collection is over. We need to get better at knowledge transfer as staff can’t get to that level of expertise anymore. We need to get better at sharing and crowd-sourcing knowledge.”

Interview participant

Part of the answer may lie in a growing role for Subject Specialist Networks. There are around 40 of these groups around the country, with specialisms ranging from natural history to sporting heritage. At present many have a relatively low profile, but they can be a key support in helping museums without specialist staff to use and interpret collections. Increasingly SSNs are opening up and considering how they can share knowledge and develop other museum professionals and expand access to collections. However, their funding model means that many are unsustainable as independent organisations and could be better supported.

Museums must also seek the increasing involvement of the public in co-producing knowledge and expertise about collections. Museums have long counted on the support of volunteers to provide knowledge about collections and help document and interpret them. The internet is opening up this type of involvement to enthusiasts across the world. Geography no longer limits volunteering on collections documentation. Several museums are already experimenting with recruiting online volunteers.

MicroPasts – a partnership that includes the British Museum, University of Cambridge Museums and University College London – allows volunteers to help digitise records, translate writings and perform other tasks that cannot easily be done by machine and which would take a single person a huge amount of time to complete. At the Museum of East Anglian Life¹⁹ a collections documentation project (supported by the MA’s Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund) has successfully recruited over 100 volunteers to digitise their records, with volunteers from as far afield as Canada and Australia, while also working face-to-face with volunteers from the local area.

Many of the innovations in this area will be dependent on museums embracing digital opportunities. DCMS’s Culture is Digital report describes the huge potential for the culture sector in this sphere²⁰ – but many museums need to invest in hardware and systems that work to be able to capitalise on these opportunities.

For example, the Museum of East Anglian Life project relies on having a cloud-based collections management system which is accessible anywhere with an internet connection, while many curators and collections managers would also benefit from WiFi connections in museum storage facilities to enable them to work on collections more efficiently.

Q10

HOW CAN MUSEUMS IMPROVE THE KNOWLEDGE THEY HOLD ABOUT THEIR COLLECTIONS OVER THE NEXT DECADE?

References

19. Tackling the Digitisation Backlog with Volunteer Power at the Museums of East Anglian Life, 2018: <https://www.vi-mm.eu/2018/07/03/tackling-the-digitisation-backlog-with-volunteer-power-at-the-museum-of-east-anglian-life/>

20. Culture is Digital, 2018: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/culture-is-digital>

THEME 3: THE DYNAMIC COLLECTION

RATIONALISING COLLECTIONS

Collections are widely seen in the sector to be too large. Many museums struggle with the legacy of over-collecting in the past and the accessioning of items that – with the benefit of hindsight – should never have entered the collection. There is also widespread duplication of items across collections in some areas, and relatively little coordination between museums to assess whether an item is required in a collection.

This means that for some museums their collections can seem to be more of a burden than an asset. And while museums should be celebrating and championing their collections, we need to get real about rationalisation and accept it as a key part of dynamic collections management. A collection should not be viewed as a permanent, unchanging asset but should be constantly reviewed with a critical eye.

This is not a new issue. NMDC's Too Much Stuff publication raised the issue in 2003 and museums have been tentatively trying out different approaches to rationalisation since then. It is clear however that very few museums have made serious progress in this area.

This is due to a range of factors: the time and labour required to go through the process in an ethical manner; concern about the view of trustees or councillors; competing priorities; and a culture of retention amongst museum staff.

There is an important role for the MA in encouraging museums to carry out ethical disposal projects without the fear of censure. The MA Ethics Committee is sometimes perceived as a gatekeeper whose role is to prevent museums from disposing from their collections. Despite the fact that the Code of Ethics for Museums clearly states that disposal is part of good collections management, this message is not always understood within museums.

Where rationalisation has been carried out successfully it tends to have been done on a project basis, often with specific support and with the involvement of museum users. The Museum of London recently carried out a substantial project to review its social history collection²² with the support of the MA's Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund. In the East of England SHARE Museums East has supported museums to rationalise with small-scale grants²³ and training aimed at empowering museum staff to make decisions about disposal. This may be a model worth replicating on a larger scale.

Museums that do choose to dispose of items from their collections are often happy to transfer items to other museum collections or public bodies. But many stop short of following the MA's Disposal Toolkits advice that if this approach fails museums should feel confident in giving items to schools, community groups, enthusiast organisations or, failing that, placing them on the open market or consider destruction. While these steps always need to be given careful consideration, museum staff should feel empowered to make such decisions after completing the full disposal process.

Q11

HOW CAN MUSEUM STAFF BE EMPOWERED TO UNDERTAKE ETHICAL DISPOSAL?

References

21. Too Much Stuff 2003: https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/too_much_stuff.pdf
22. Perspectives on disposal: Museum of London Review and Rationalisation Project, Collections Trust Blog: <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/blog/perspectives-on-disposal-museum-of-london-review-and-rationalisation-project/>
23. SHARE Museums East Rationalisation Grants: <http://sharemuseumseast.org.uk/collections-review-grants/>

"I'm pro rationalisation in theory, but it's very resource intensive. It's difficult to justify doing it when there's so much else going on."

Interview participant

THEME 3: THE DYNAMIC COLLECTION

STORED COLLECTIONS

Museum storage is a perennial concern for museums with substantial collections. Lack of space or poor storage conditions can lead to degradation of existing collections and can deter active contemporary collecting. Many museums spend substantial amounts of money on commercial storage, or on the construction of high cost, specialist storage facilities. Archaeological storage has its own specific set of problems driven by the huge amount of finds from developer funded archaeology, and has been addressed in a recent Historic England plan²⁴. It is clear that there is substantial potential for innovation and efficiency in this area, but it will require investment to achieve it.

Rationalisation can provide some answers to the storage issue, but this raises potential ethical issues, as it can incentivise the disposal of large items from museum collections in order to create space. While disposal has its place in opening up storage space, it should not be the primary driver for creating new space.

Museums need to store their collections in more efficient ways. One solution is to learn from other industries, such as logistics and food, which have created efficiencies by scaling up storage. Some museums and cultural organisations have already sought to adapt this model. The Science Museum Group will shortly begin construction of a large, low energy, relatively low-cost collections management facility at the Group's National Collections Centre, a former airfield near Swindon, Wiltshire. Thousands of items stored in the facility will be trackable using barcode technology borrowed from the logistics industry and the Group will be able to provide high-quality digital access to the collection for researchers and the public following a massive digitisation effort. Physical access for the public and researchers will also be possible through tours and by appointment from 2023. The facility will also enable more efficient preparation of items for display in the Group's museums and loans to other organisations.

This model works well at the size and scale of a national museum and it is hoped that object storage will also be available to other organisations at the National Collections Centre in the future. It is entirely possible that museums in different regions of the UK could work in partnership to deliver similar programmes. Indeed, the partnership between Glasgow Life and the Hunterian Museum at Glasgow University has already led to a combined storage space for both institutions being built at Kelvin Hall. This project also provides a high level of access by making the stored collections visible and accessible to the public in a mixed-use building that includes sports and other facilities.

The shared storage model can work, but it will often rely on the flexibility of key stakeholders, particularly where it involves collections being moved away from their home city. The move of the Science Museum Group's photographic collection from Bradford to London in 2015 was a reminder of the sensitivity that can accompany any effort to move prized collections, even those that are held in storage.

Storage issues are not purely practical; the practice of keeping more than 90 per cent of items in storage is regularly questioned by the press, the public and politicians. To date museums have responded by attempting to make stores more accessible through the creation of open stores and store tours. But these solutions only reach a small number of enthusiasts and if storage increasingly moves off-site and away from population centres it will become difficult to continue this approach.

Reference

24. A New Plan to Address England's Archaeology Archives Challenge, Historic England, 2018: <https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/news/new-plan-englands-archaeology-archives-challenge>

THEME 3: THE DYNAMIC COLLECTION

Museums will need to find other ways of dealing with storage. Increasing the number of loans and making digital records available have their place, but museums also need to be better advocates for the value of their non-display collections. We need to be able to demonstrate how they are of use to researchers and the public by working to create high profile partnerships that put the collections in the public eye. Many museums are already doing this, for example the Unexpected Encounters project helped to revitalise natural history collections at six museums in the North West of England by inspiring and engaging local elderly people and recasting the collections in an experiential and non-specialist way²⁵. Museums could also consider how creative projects can get items out of storage and into new environments and should be willing to relax rules about how some items can be used, transported and placed.

“We need to do a much better job of advocating for the value of stored collections – perhaps we can draw parallels with zoos and botanic gardens, which have both public displays and large research collections.”

Interview participant

Q12

HOW CAN MUSEUMS MAKE THE CASE FOR THE PUBLIC BENEFIT OF THEIR NON-DISPLAY COLLECTIONS?

Reference

25. Unexpected Encounters, 2018: <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/publications/UnexpectedEncounters.pdf>

NEXT STEPS FOR COLLECTIONS 2030

*This discussion paper is an opportunity for everyone in the sector to provide feedback and contribute to the conversation about the future of collections. Please **click here** to submit your responses to the questions in this paper and remember to join the discussion on social media using **#collections2030** and **#museums2018**.*

Following the consultation period, we will analyse responses. Based on your feedback we will publish a set of priorities for the future of collections in early 2019. This will form the basis for our ongoing advocacy efforts for museum collections.

#collections2030

#museums2018

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Steering group

Steve Miller, Head of Norfolk Museums, Norfolk Museums Service

Sally MacDonald, Director, Museum of Science and Industry

Gillian Findlay, Head of Museums and Collections, Culture Perth and Kinross

Owain Rhys, Community Engagement and Participation Manager, Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales

Simon Cane, Executive Director, UCL Culture

Sharon Heal, Director, Museums Association

Organisations on the Collections 2030 reference group

Art Fund

Arts Council England

Collections Trust

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

Heritage Lottery Fund

Museums Development Network

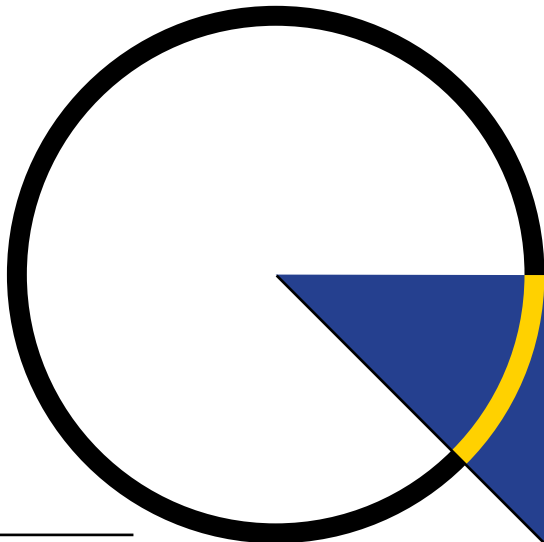
Museums Galleries Scotland

National Museum Directors' Council

Northern Ireland Museums Council

Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Welsh Museums Federation



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