

Sustainability and museums

Report on consultation

January 2009

MUSEUMS
ASSOCIATION



In summer 2008 the Museums Association (MA) ran a consultation about sustainability and museums. We held workshops throughout the UK and published a downloadable discussion paper on our website and a printed summary leaflet that was sent to all members. (Both are available at www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability). The discussion paper was a result of extensive desk research, consultations with experts, including an expert roundtable and discussions at MA committees.



What we said

We took a holistic view of sustainability, encouraging museums to take a 'triple bottom line' approach that considers the three areas of economic, social and environmental sustainability. We explored the practicalities of individual aspects of sustainability (such as energy use and relationships to local communities). We also discussed the deeper, longer-term implications of sustainability for museums. We observed that because of their work transmitting collections and knowledge from the past to the future, and their social purpose, museums are deeply involved in sustainability and yet rarely think about their overall contribution to it.

We suggested that museums might be consuming more resources than is justified and that the past decade's highly successful growth in buildings, expenditure and audiences might not be the most sustainable path to follow in the next decade, in view of the pressure to reduce energy consumption and the reduction in lottery funding. We suggested museums might want to think less about growth, size and quantity and more about quality and depth of relationships.

Our ideas chimed well with other agendas, such as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS's) ideas on excellence and loosening of the MA's and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council's (MLA's) rules on disposal. The consultation period also coincided with a significant rise in fuel costs and the banking crisis. It therefore proved timely and relevant to museums at a number of levels. We had particularly enthusiastic support from the National Trust, Tate and the DCMS.

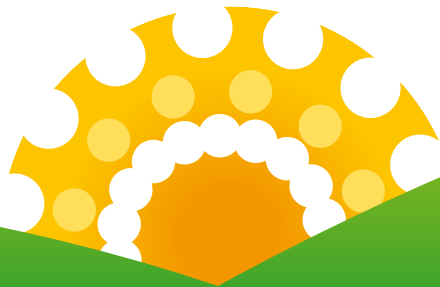


What we did

We held sessions at the MA annual conferences in 2007 and 2008. We also participated in other meetings and conferences, including ones organised by: the DCMS, the Rural Museums Network, the Victoria and Albert Museum with the National Museum Directors Conference (NMDC), the International Institute of Conservation, Renaissance East of England and Tipping Point. We introduced a sustainability section on the MA website that included the discussion paper, case studies and further resources. Museums Journal published several articles, including a feature on the MA's ideas in June 2008.

We held around 20 half-day discussion workshops throughout the UK. They followed a standard format that encouraged extensive participation. They were supported by regional and national museum organisations, including CyMAL (Museums, Libraries, Archives, Wales), Northern Ireland Museums Council, Tate, the regional museums, libraries and archives councils and the regional Renaissance museum hubs. In general they were popular — many had a waiting list and the session in London had to be repeated twice to meet demand. Around 400 people attended, generating approximately 600 written responses.

In total, 600–700 people engaged in discussions for longer than one hour specifically about the MA's ideas. A further 300–400 heard about our ideas first hand at other conferences and meetings. More still came across them via Museums Journal, the MA website or the summary leaflet.



Do museums care about sustainability?

The key aim of the consultation and workshops was simply to get people in museums thinking and talking about sustainability. On the face of it, we were successful, with a good level of attendance at most workshops and enthusiastic participation. There was general support for including social, economic and environmental sustainability and over 90 per cent of people who attended the workshops said that museums need to think more about sustainability.

However, the number of formal responses to the consultation was disappointing. We expected around 100, but in fact got only 20 full written responses from museums, sector bodies and individuals. This may be because many people who might have sent in a written response attended a workshop instead. However, it could indicate that outside of our sustainability workshops people in museums are not in fact thinking and talking much about sustainability and are not seeing it as a core part of their work and planning.

'It's pointless showcasing history to the world if it costs the earth'

Response to consultation



Quantity versus quality and other big questions

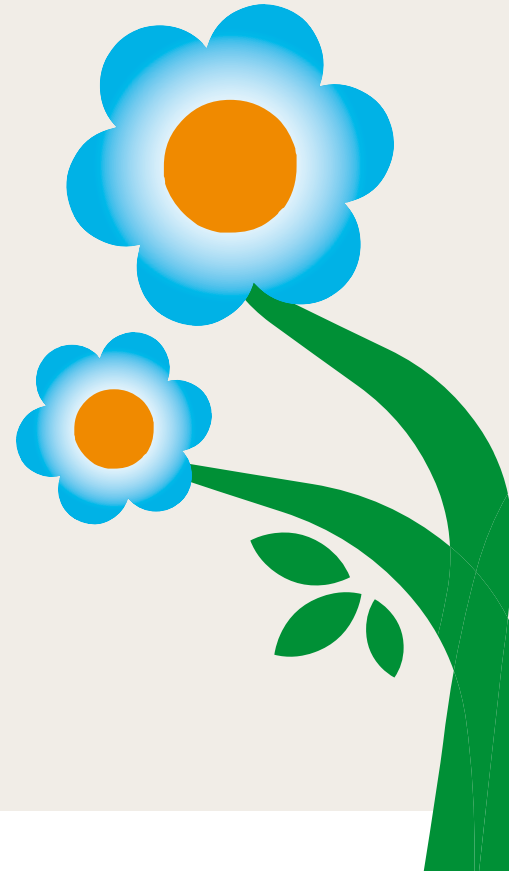
The workshops engaged with some of the more fundamental questions raised in the discussion paper about the future activities and purpose of museums. Participants' feedback demonstrated a strong acceptance that expanding buildings and striving for more tourists and ever-larger audiences were not necessarily the most sustainable ways to develop.

However, only a minority of the written responses from museums shared this view, with most respondents (out of a very small sample) supporting the idea that they needed to become more sustainable but arguing that this could be combined with continued growth. Most responding sector bodies failed to address the point directly, although some suggested that museums should consider new ways of working and making the best of what they had before considering extensive refurbishment or new build. One pointed out that growth could mean growth in quality and depth of audience experience rather than growth in size.

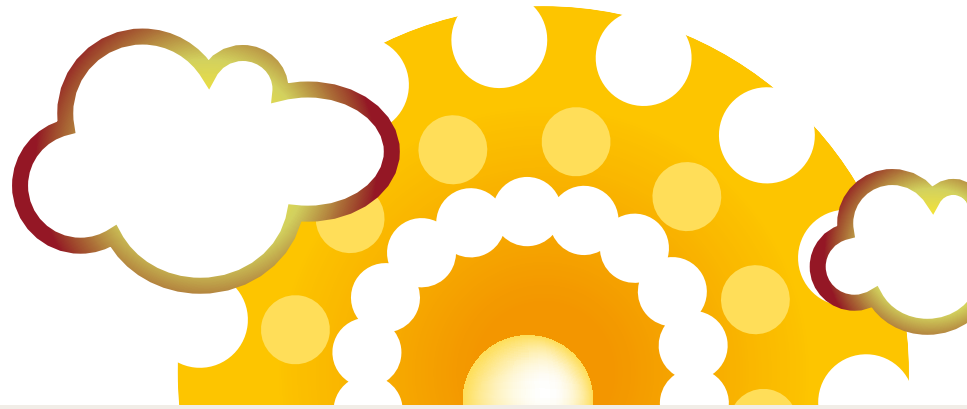
There was some support among formal respondents for an emphasis on quality rather than quantity (although less than might have been expected in view of the enthusiasm for quality heard at the workshops), support for reviewing collections-care standards with a view to reducing energy requirements and some interest in the contribution (or not) that temporary exhibitions might make to sustainability.

Sector bodies were keen for museums to review their collections with a view to making them more sustainable and wanted museums to highlight sustainability in displays, exhibitions and programmes. However, museums were mixed in their support for these ideas, with comments ranging from 'Within the niche of each museum there are sustainability stories to be told.' to 'I do not agree that it is the role of most museums to educate the public about sustainability.'

One sector body suggested that sustainability should be addressed at a sector or regional level, not just in terms of individual museums.



Improving sustainability in practice



There was widespread agreement that there are many practical steps museums could take immediately to improve their sustainability. Workshop participants had many ideas for improving museums' environmental performance; the measures identified most often were (most popular first):

- **using better lighting**
- **changing staff behaviour**
- **encouraging greener travel**
- **having more flexible collections-care requirements and using air conditioning less**
- **improving building insulation**
- **better reuse and recycling, including display and exhibition materials**
- **using local suppliers more**
- **heating buildings less.**

Suggested ways of improving museums' social responsibility were (most popular first):

- **use local/green/fair trade suppliers and contractors, particularly for shop and cafe supplies**
- **work with other community organisations and local groups**
- **consult and involve people.**

All of these responses come within the general area of being an integral part of local society. Other common comments in this area included:

- **be accessible and inclusive in displays and programmes**
- **put the museum building at the heart of the community, for example by encouraging community groups to use it for meetings, using it as a place for discussion and presenting local exhibitions**

- **provide training, work experience and skill sharing**
- **reach new users and serve disadvantaged groups, eg through outreach**
- **provide volunteering opportunities**
- **diversify staff and volunteers to reflect the community.**

Other suggestions concerning employment, training and development, included recruitment of local people onto the staff, flexible employment practices and high-quality development opportunities for staff.

What would help museums?



The responses show a desire for the MA, or other sector bodies, to continue work on sustainability, particularly in terms of providing practical help and guidance. Responses from the workshops show the main difficulties people foresee in becoming more sustainable are: changing staff behaviour, senior and organisational attitudes, cost and particular difficulties caused by historic buildings.*

*Note that there are some differences in perception of difficulties for improving overall sustainability and for improving environmental sustainability:

- costs/resources 45 per cent overall (75 per cent for environmental improvements)
- staff attitudes 25 per cent overall (70 per cent for environmental improvements)
- historic/listed building 17 per cent overall (30 per cent for environmental improvements)

According to people who attended the workshops the main ways in which the MA and sector bodies could help are (in order):

- **provide more case studies and practical information – 50 per cent**
- **show leadership to encourage organisational change – 35 per cent**
- **provide training, workshops and networking – 20 per cent**
- **put more pressure on museums to think about sustainability in planning by including it in, for example, accreditation – 14 per cent**
- **provide guidance or toolkits for decision making – 12 per cent.**

[All percentages above 20 per cent are rounded to the nearest 5 per cent]

Other points for sector bodies and funders to improve sustainability mentioned by formal respondents or 5–10 per cent of workshop attendees include:

- **stress quality rather than quantity**
- **explicitly ask applicants to address sustainability in funding applications**
- **review collections-care standards**
- **encourage museums to work in partnership**
- **stress the ethical dimension of sustainability**
- **provide guidance on assessing/measuring sustainability**
- **provide access to expertise/audits**
- **provide, or make the case for, funding**
- **champion successes.**

Suggestions

Suggestions for specific activities by sector bodies to help museums include:

Publishing, training, guidance

Web resource of case studies and guidance, regular content in Museum Practice and Museums Journal, conferences and training, regular emails, good practice guidelines, guidance on planning and decision-making for sustainability.

Advocacy/policy-level work

Sector bodies and funders (eg accreditation, Renaissance, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the DCMS) to take more account of all aspects of sustainability in their funding and policies, high-level think tank or sustainability strategy group, award scheme for sustainable museums, work up sustainability principles and incorporate in the Code of Ethics for Museums.

Work with others to reach museums

Work with museum-development officers, regional networks/learning partnership, engage directors in discussions about sustainability, work with governing bodies, provide guidance on assessing/measuring sustainability, leadership network for sustainability, support Mission, Models, Money work on new business models.

Procurement

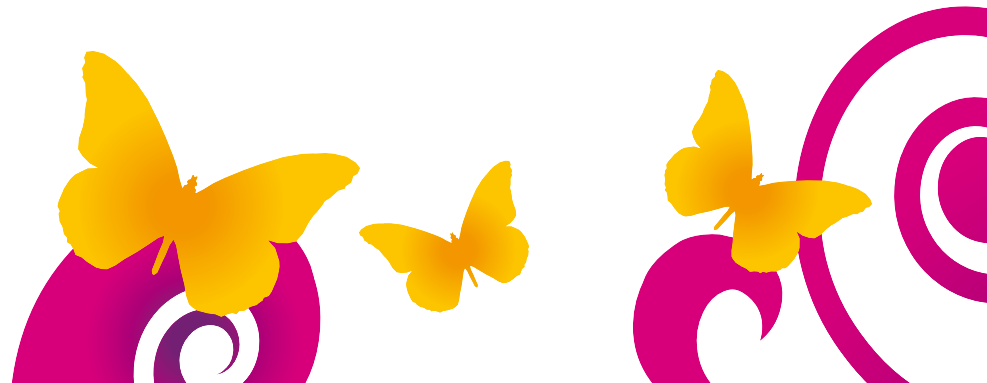
List of green/ethical suppliers, encourage main museum-specialist suppliers to green their products, museum-sector free-cycle scheme for display materials, crates etc.

Support for individual museums

Expertise/audits, interest-free loans or 'invest to save' funding for energy-saving equipment and systems.

Specialist areas

Advice on museum lighting, support Tate/NMDC-led review of collections-care standards, advice on improving energy efficiency of museums in historic buildings, research carbon footprints of different types of museum activity.



The MA hopes to have discussions with other sector bodies about undertaking some of these ideas to ensure that museums have practical help with straightforward practical changes to improve their sustainability.

It would also be useful to encourage more thought about the deeper, longer-term implications of sustainability for museums. At the MA conference in October 2008 a session encouraged people to do just that. This involved fewer than 100 people considering the subject for only 90 minutes so may not be typical of the sector as a whole, but it is interesting to note that the largest number of comments about the long-term sustainable future of museums concerned buildings – moving from the existing building to something more appropriate, working more outside museums' buildings or abandoning museum buildings. Another large group of comments concerned working in partnership with other types of organisation and stronger local connections and engagement.

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