

To improve use of museum stored collections:

- Museums should recognise that their collections are public resources and hence that they have an obligation to make them publicly available. There is increasing public demand for access to collections.
- Museums should actively advertise and market the availability of collections, as they do other services.
- Museums should publish what is in their collections, preferably online and at least with collection-level descriptions.
- Museums should tell users how to access or visit collections in store. They should provide examples to give people ideas on how collections could be used.
- Standards for accreditation should include benchmarks for collections access and use. Collections-related grants should require evidence of increased access to be produced.

In addition:

- Some museums found to be making good use of their collections have a collections access officer who liaises with local groups and facilitate collections programming and use. While not found to be essential, those that had such a post found it invaluable.
- Curators should consider the focus of their role: what are the benefits of devoting effort to exhibitions; or to answering enquiries; or to generating and facilitating other uses of collections? This consideration could fit with developing greater knowledge of collections.
- Museums should mainstream collaboration and partnerships with services in other sectors, offering engagement with collections as a service: for example, volunteer activities planned with agencies working with the disadvantaged.

“Museum management needs to understand how to break down the market for use into a series of niche markets, understanding the needs of each... the profession must re-prioritise the specialist, enthusiast and academic use of collections ...as part of the way in which knowledge regarding the collections is developed.”

Museum survey response



Editor and principal author
Suzanne Keene

Contributors
Alice Stevenson
Francesca Monti

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COLLECTIONS FOR PEOPLE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS



ARE COLLECTIONS FOR PEOPLE?

74% of museum respondents think collections are insufficiently used

97% of museums report a steady or increasing demand for access to collections

Only 13% of museums strongly promote public access to stored collections

“Users, especially the interested public, too seldom experience access to the 200 million items in the collections of English and Welsh museums as a public right. This is a service in which museums should excel.”

Report conclusion



THE QUESTIONS

Collections for People is a research project from UCL addressing the use of museum stored collections as a public resource. It investigated current use of collections that remain in store, and makes recommendations for improved future use.

Collections in UK museums grew enormously in the latter half of the 20th century yet museum collections, mostly maintained at public expense, are perceived as an underused resource. The Museums Association's 2005 report, *Collections for the Future*¹, together with press comments and books such as *Treasures on Earth* (2002)² and *Fragments of the World* (2005)³, brought this issue into sharp focus. *Collections for People* set out to understand the scale of museum stored collections, and the main parameters of their access and use:

- What is the size and nature of collections as a resource? How are they distributed, geographically and among different types of museum?
- How much are different types of collection used by people other than museum staff? What sort of people use collections? What do they use them for: research, teaching and learning, creative activities, visits for enjoyment such as store tours?
- How do users perceive this service? Do museums actively market collections access? Do they publicise what is in their collections?
- How do museums facilitate collections use? What are the factors associated with greater use of collections? What do museums see as the barriers to more use?

All museums in England and Wales were invited to complete a questionnaire in summer 2007. The survey resulted in a sample representative of the general museum demographics that provided the basis for statistically significant analysis. Research with users took place in early 2008.

A full report of the findings of the research is available at

www.ucl.ac.uk/storedcollections

www.collectionslink.org.uk/use_collection

¹ Wilkinson, H. 2005. *Collections for the future*. Museums Association.

² Thomson, K. 2002. *Treasures on earth: museums, collections and paradoxes*. Faber.

³ Keene, S. 2005. *Fragments of the world: the uses of museum collections*. Elsevier.

FINDINGS 1

Establishing the size and nature of museum collections is no easy task; nevertheless we do now know a great deal. The Collections for People research does not contradict the generally accepted estimate of 200 million items in collections.

The number of visitors to stored collections, or users, is low overall. Only 20% of museums in the sample reported 400 or more users a year. Within these a full range of museum types and sizes is represented. Overall, museums reported from 0 to 14,000 visitors a year to their collections.

52% of museums report increasing public demand for access to collections, with 45% reporting steady demand and only 7 of 222 reporting a decrease in recent years. 74% of museum respondents think that collections are insufficiently used.

The most commonly reported collections use is research, but education, social benefit, memory and identity, creative uses and sheer enjoyment are all noted as well. Less-used collections that are often stored off-site notably include geology and ethnographic collections.

Digital issues are also important. While users mainly prefer to find information about collections from online listings, museums report that they deal with most enquiries through individual contact by telephone, email or letter.

In practice, there are different levels of collections engagement: from open public or group visits; to special experiences through targeted programmes; to inspiring or even pivotal experiences for a few – sometimes delivering important social benefits. This is reflected in the range of provision from open stores to individual appointments for researchers.

This service offers an important opportunity for museums to be highly creative in serving niche markets, offering interesting experiences to users. A wide variety of ways of providing access to collections was found.

FINDINGS 2

Factors associated with having more users of stored collections were mainly those influenced by management priorities and motivation. Museums that publicise access, provide for groups as well as for individuals or have designated or national collections commonly have more users of their stored collections. Perhaps surprisingly, factors not associated with use included the number of staff, receipt of a collections-related grant, accreditation or registration and type of collection.

Research with users suggests that this service provision is at present haphazard and patchy. Of a small sample of mystery shoppers who approached museums to gain access to collections, one third rated the service received as excellent, while a further third said it was 'impossible' even to find out if the museum had particular objects they were interested in. Users, especially the interested public, too seldom experience access to the 200 million items in the collections of English and Welsh museums as a public right. This is a service in which museums should excel.

