Dear Jenny

The Museums Association (MA) will be responding to the online consultation but, following a discussion by the Museums Association’s board, I thought it would be helpful if I also wrote directly to you to bring out the points that the MA considers to be of great importance.

First, we would like to commend HLF for the thoroughness of the consultation and for the energy it is putting into speaking directly to so many people in the sector. Many members of the MA board and staff have had the opportunity to talk directly with HLF staff and trustees and this has been very welcome. I do not envy HLF the task of reconciling the varied views you have been hearing, but of course wish you luck and offer the MA’s continuing support and help if we can be of any assistance.

The first key point the MA would like to address is the proposed new strategic aim for HLF. We can see benefits in a single, short aim, but think that the one proposed is too broad. We worry, in particular, that the absence of learning and participation from the aim could, gradually over time, lead to less attention being paid to them. HLF has played a central role in encouraging museums to prioritise learning and, particularly, participation. At this time of shrinking resources there is a possibility that some organisations might be tempted to give a lower priority to learning and participation. We believe that this will weaken their sustainability and we urge you not to inadvertently permit that. If you wish to have a single strategic aim, we have two possible suggestions. The words learning and participation could be incorporated in the single aim (for example ‘making a positive difference to people’s participation in heritage and their learning from it’). Alternatively, you might accompany the strategic aim with two or three points that express what making a difference means (for example, better conservation, wider participation and deeper learning). We also suggest that HLF’s strategic aim should include specific reference to sustainability – see below.

On a more specific, but possibly related point, MA understands the reasons why you are suggesting that urgent acquisitions might not in future require a learning plan, but we urge you to reconsider. If time is of the essence, the learning plan could be produced after the acquisition was made and, of course, it should be appropriate to the size of the grant and would not have to be extensive for a small acquisition.
The second point that the Museums Association wishes HLF to consider is the importance of organisational sustainability. The consultation’s suggestions about building a more resilient heritage community are most welcome and we would like to urge you to go a little further. HLF has been excellent at implicitly considering the sustainability of applicants. We suggest that you should now consider doing this more explicitly when you scrutinise applications and set it as one of your strategic aims. HLF could consider giving grants that have the specific aim of reducing an organisation’s costs or increasing its income, eg funding for a shop or on-line retail. In itself this would not necessarily directly contribute to conservation, learning or participation but its overall effect on the organisation would be to increase its ability to undertake conservation, learning and participation in the long term. We also urge you to consider extending your proposed support for organisational development beyond voluntary organisations to public sector organisations. As part of increasing the capacity and resilience of the wider sector we urge you to fund training schemes for existing staff, as well as new entrants, and to be willing to fund organisations such as museum federations.

Finally, we welcome HLF’s desire to support the passing on of knowledge and skills. We suggest that one way of doing this would be to require all grant recipients to share what they have learnt from a project with the wider sector. This could, for example, take the form of simple low-cost workshops. The Museums Association has had success with this approach in its Monument Fellowships, which all include an element of sharing expertise beyond the museum hosting the fellowship.

We also urge you to significantly lower the £1m threshold at which you require applicants to have training plans. In addition, the sector’s expertise would be hugely enhanced if HLF could find ways of making available its own cumulative knowledge of best practice.

The above points are those that the Museums Association considers to be the most important. I hope they are helpful. We are making further points in our online response.

Yours sincerely

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