Findings of consultation on adapting Arts Council England’s goals for museums

August 2011

Background

In July 2011 the Museums Association held a brief online consultation with its members designed to invite responses elicit information relevant to adapting Arts Council England’s goals to reflect priorities and values in regional and local museums in England.

The consultation was only open for two weeks; 65 people responded, covering a full range of types of museum and job types, but with a considerable number from local authority museums and in collections-related posts. It is, of course, a self-selected sample and so may not be representative of the MA membership or the sector as a whole.

In the consultation, we asked six questions, which were developed in discussion with the Arts Council:

1. Thinking about your museum service, where have you made a significant impact that you would like to develop further?
2. Looking ahead, if your museum service is to thrive and be excellent, what public impacts will it make?
3. Apart from funding what needs to happen to make your museum sustainable and improve its social and cultural impact?
4. How might the arts council best help to develop and diversify people working in museums?
5. How should the arts council’s goals for museums encompass and advance the engagement, learning and participation that museums offer?
6. Are there any other comments you would like to make?

To a degree, question 1 is people’s reflections on their recent work and question 2 is their aspirations for the future. Question 3 then brings a ‘reality check’ by asking respondents to consider sustainability as well as impact.
Observations on responses

The most striking thing about the responses is the regularity of comments in response to questions one and two about relationships with communities and participatory engagement. This theme arises significantly more often than the other strong common themes of learning and access to and use of collections. This suggests that there are changes in the way museums see their work and in the language people are using to describe their impact and activities. This response summarises where many respondents feel their museums have had significant impacts:

‘We have made particular impacts in working with schools (raising attainment and aspiration); families (learning together and having fun!); working with non-traditional audiences (increasing engagement with civil society); in including communities in project decision making and co-production; in using volunteering to help people experiencing worklessness, develop skills and self-confidence and support them on a journey into training and/or employment; in using our collections, real and virtual, to engage audiences of all types with their heritage and culture and that of the region they live in or are visiting.’

Many comments show how museums holistically link their work with collections, communities and learners.

Responses to question three included some different themes, but community relationships and participation continued to be the most dominant. Question three’s other main themes were income generation/entrepreneurship, skills and advocacy. A neat encapsulation of common responses to the ‘sustainability’ question is:

‘Greater emphasis on key partnership working. Further involvement of communities through active voluntary programmes that the organisation can sustain and a more entrepreneurial approach to ensure our museum’s long-term stability.’

Throughout there were regular comments about the importance of volunteering, the value of partnership and the need to recognise the wide diversity of museums in terms of size, role, location and subject matter.

It’s interesting that there were very few comments about new governance structures or on collecting per se.

The following exploration of the key themes in the consultation consists primarily of a selection of comments from consultation responses. Our comments are in italics. We present the more commonly mentioned themes first.
Community relationships and participatory engagement

The sense of working with communities (rather than simply for audiences) is remarkably strong. Also noticeable is the range of community impacts mentioned (well-being, health, place-making, skills for work, tourist economy).

[To be excellent we will] create a sense of place and belonging for diverse communities; be seen to be a unique resource for learning by a wide variety of groups and individuals; enable people to explore their own histories.

[For sustainability we need to] Widen the community groups we work with [and increase] partnership working - getting people to use our venues instead of us trying to do everything.

Public Engagement/ co-designing programmes, exhibitions, galleries and projects that have been developed with community groups through which the participants have developed significant skills and knowledge, felt validated and had aspirations raised. The impact these projects have had on audience development and overall participation.

[We have had a significant impact on] community wellbeing - with adult mental health (reminiscence, mindfulness), tourism (family fun) & supporting communities (local history groups, archives & events).

The public need to feel the museum belongs to them, that the collections are part of their culture and their future development... People working in the sector need to be able to share their assets to benefit the public. This includes staff, knowledge, ideas even profit. Collaborative working is key. Start taking some risks.
Learning

Learning is mentioned often but it is noticeable by its rareness in answers to question 3. This may arise partly because of the shift in language, towards engagement and participation; events and activities rather than informal learning or lifelong learning. It may also suggest that museums believe increased sustainable impact will come from paying attention to other areas.

Continued investment in learning, both formal and informal, would have massive impacts to our users. Getting out into communities through events and hands-on sessions as well as helping schools, colleges and researchers.

We are looking to expand the museum to offer more community art space and to accommodate larger school groups. We also need meeting space to run courses and additional adult orientated activities.

We will continue to work towards engaging young people in science, and open their horizon to new opportunities, e.g. with the medical industries, universities, and other medical professions.

I would like to see this museum become a hub for learning for all ages. The archaeological collections here are a wonderful resource that link directly to the National Curriculum, college courses and university courses.
Collections and displays

Most comments about collections, displays and knowledge are about their value as a community resource, the importance of making them ‘work harder’ and the importance of increasing engagement and access. Comments about research and scholarship figured less strongly. There are very few comments about collecting.

The key (all embracing) area is accessibility. Within this we are talking education, audience development and making the collections more available through digital technology. We need to make collections ‘work harder for their keep’.

[We need] to find a balance between authority (based on scholarship and reputation as safe, neutral public space) and accessibility (to different needs, different learning styles and different voices). By the way, where this balance sits will be different for different institutions and their communities - ACE need to be sensitive to this when they are defining excellence.

[For sustainability we need to] ensure collections remain the core of what we do, their uniqueness, the wow factor and stories they engender permeate everything we do from community projects to learning programmes, blockbuster shows to supporting adult learning.

My gallery has great temporary exhibitions but its permanent spaces are full of broken and dated digital displays that we have no funding to put right. There needs to be sustainable investment and succession planning for "permanent" displays and the digital technologies used in them. The life of a digital display is typically 3 years, yet "permanent" galleries are expected to last 10 - 15 years: result - broken and redundant digital displays for years to come. Encourage planning for refreshment and renewal at the outset to keep the digital elements working.

Become able to change with greater speed, and sustainably, move away from the ideas of permanent and not changing but in an environmentally sustainable way - so don't always aspire to the mega multi-million redevelopments. If do redevelopments then should be so can change at low cost, low environmental impact. Move away from all that matters are the museum sites and a 10-5 opening mentality, delivery is feasible in different ways - collections don't just need buildings - curators thinking about delivery beyond display and the walls... Digital offers many new opportunities to engage. Could be real opportunities to work even more collaboratively with performing arts, theatre as ways of opening up collections.
Income generation and entrepreneurship

*There are plentiful comments about income generation, but they tend to be rather general in nature. This suggests there may be a skills and knowledge gap.*

We need additional space to enable us to establish more income streams and to meet the demand for community exhibition space and education facilities.

*Responses also highlighted the need to balance income generation with ‘public benefit’ goals.*

Entrepreneurship and social benefit are complementary not antagonistic if done correctly.

Please let’s not lose sight of the excellent audience engagement work that has been done over the past 10 years in the chase to wring money out of wealthy patrons and sponsors.
Skills and knowledge

Many contributions recognised the need for skills in order to embrace new ways of working which are outward-facing and future-focused.

CPD and training to encourage a new cohort of museum professionals who look beyond the narrow bounds of single disciplines and beyond the horizons of museums as a whole. Encouragement to develop partnership working with a wide range of non-museum organisations.

The development of new staff who have relevant skills and experience for museums in the C21st.

[For sustainability we need] Workforce that is skilled in areas of public engagement/co-production and working in a participative way, who recognise the knowledge and expertise that may come from working in this way. Also need to be digitally savvy.

Losing knowledge and skills is as damaging to a museum as losing (or selling) its collections; once they’re gone it’s difficult to get them back. To be truly sustainable and have realistic impacts there needs to be staff, time and funding to do more than just tread water!

Provide mechanisms for good quality advice and support and build in a level of accountability too.

There were virtually no comments about leadership but the themes described in responses indicate the aptitudes, priorities and skills that future leaders will need.
Advocacy

Most comments about advocacy argue that others, especially ACE, should be doing advocacy on behalf of museums. This suggests museums are reluctant to undertake their own advocacy and there may be a confidence/skills gap here.

We would have more impact if we could prove the social impact we know we have. One of the most important areas where we need help is with social return on investment and the ability to provide £ values against government agendas and priorities in this area.

[In future ACE should be] celebrating our successes and promoting them, with passion, force, conviction and on a large scale, to government.

Contribution sector can make to wider agendas such as tourism, health and community cohesion needs to be recognised at all levels of government.
Partnership

*Partnerships are already happening, but responses suggest there is an appetite for more partnership working, and with new partners, to generate additional benefits and impact.*

[To be excellent we will have] active engagement with archaeology and joint projects with environmental and local studies organisations including libraries and archives.

[For sustainability we need] a change of culture from an inward looking traditional view to a positive, forward thinking, all embracing view is needed. An 'anything is possible’ mind set is crucial. [We have been] creating partnerships between the museum and arts practitioners and opening the museum up to being more than just a historical and archaeological resource.

Partnership working with health, education and social care providers will be vital.
Workforce diversification

*There is general support for workforce diversification; most comments concern opening up entry-routes to the workforce and some question the current preference for graduate or masters-level recruits.*

Greater volunteer involvement in museums and ... financial and mentoring support on apprenticeship schemes.

Encourage more vocational training and qualifications - supporting non-academic routes into the sector.

Develop an apprentice programme and mentor new recruits to the museum profession.

Increased emphasis on volunteering, learning and equalities. Offering CPD/training in these areas.
Volunteering

Many comments stress the value of volunteering – both as a staff resource and as a means of community engagement.

We now have a ladder of engagement, where young people can volunteer to devise activities for our public programme; these run a twice yearly basis. They then have the option to progress to a peer mentor and if they stay with us the potential of becoming a young consultant (paid position). As a result of this programme young people have a voice in the planning and development of all areas of our public programme.

The museum has now recruited over 42 volunteers. They are the bedrock of the museum.

ACE need to get to grips with how important volunteering is to museums. Some of their current statements come across as defensive. Understandable that they want to protect artists from exploitation but volunteers are a huge part of museum workforce and an opportunity for promoting diversity and civic engagement in culture.
Governance

There are few comments on governance; they mainly concern diversity and skills. Changes to governance structures are mentioned only rarely.

Positive action on diversification of workforce - including at governance level.

Offer good quality subsidised training to board members and staff.
The diversity of museums

Recognise that museums vary widely (in size, resources, governance, nature of collections etc); they offer scope for engagement in many different ways and will need support to achieve this in many different ways

Expand the definition of cultural learning to include what all museums do and include disciplines such as history, science...etc
In conclusion:

The overriding single theme that comes through is the importance of engagement

This holds good for both reflections on recent and current achievements and ‘future’ priorities.

Keep audiences at the heart of the goals. Help museums to focus on developing their understanding of their audiences better in order to create meaningful experiences.

Putting the public/audience at the centre. This should be something that is not paid lip service to, but seen as absolutely essential. We are there for the public benefit.

Audience engagement and learning should be one of their [ACE’s] goals for all the organisations under their remit. There is a lot of knowledge and skill in the sector already and it may be that this is an area we can help the arts to develop.

The role of the Arts Council

The consultation responses include many suggestions about the role of the Arts Council. Some are included in the comments above. While there is some nervousness about the Arts Council’s ability to serve certain types of museum, such as science and technology museums, there seems to be a general, sometimes enthusiastic, welcome for ACE’s new responsibilities:

‘I feel very positive about the Arts Council taking on some of the roles and responsibilities of the MLA. I feel that this may help to forge cultural links and bridge a gap between arts, museums and non-cultural organisations promoting partnership working in new, innovative and diverse ways.’