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EMPOWERING COLLECTIONS

COLLECTIONS 2030

Collections for the Future

- Over a decade since published
- Effective Collections fund 2009-2012
- Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund
- Ethical Guidelines for the Disposals/Disposals Toolkit

Meanwhile...

MUSEUMS CHANGE LIVES

The approach

- Steering Group
- Consultation Group
- Interviews
- Group consultations
- Discussion paper

SEPTEMBER 2018

MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION

2030

20

COLLECTIONS

DISCUSSION PAPER

Q1: What type of collections work should museums prioritise in order to deliver public benefit over the next decade?

- "The absolute basics - knowing what you have, why you have it, where it came from, where it is etc. A surprisingly large number of museums are still not at this point and no further work to deliver public benefit with collections can be done before this stage is complete."

- "Collections work should never be done 'for the sake of it'; the 'use' of our collections is increasingly the focus of our work... and therefore the 'usefulness' of our collections (and our collections work) should be at the forefront of our planning. So, documentation which does not enable use or access cannot be a priority.."

Q2. How can funders and policy-makers support your priority areas for collections?

- "The biggest impact funders and policy makers could make would be providing long-term rather than short-term project support. This would allow museums to plan and deliver sustainable projects which could really make an impact, and have the advantage of allowing staff to build and retain collections expertise and work more effectively with those externally who have expertise."

- "Funders and policy makers need to take more risks on outcomes – what might be a priority for us is not for someone else…"

- "We need funders to have a longer-term view of support so that we can carry out basic collections management work which will lead on to better engagement with the collections."

Q3. How can museums use their collections to empower people and communities?

- "Museums are frequently being told in recent years to do this kind of work, but unless it's something that someone at your museum has experience of, it can be very daunting as to how to approach this."

- "We recognise that many visitors do not come with activist intentions, and we should not measure success by whether or not we have inspired audiences to action. We have to recognise that many visitors come for fun rather than 'empowerment', however defined."

- "Seeing yourself represented in culture is necessary to value and want to participate in it. Strategic collecting from underrepresented groups and additional narratives on existing collections are needed."-

Q4. What needs to change within museums for collections to be used for social impact?

- "Not all objects in museum collections have the same value - yes, some are utterly unique and irreplaceable, yet many others are of far less historical, social, aesthetic or financial value. Objects were collected for future people to use. As one of my colleagues said: "We are the future of 50 years ago. They kept these objects for us to use.""

Q5. How can museums make the most of their collections in an era of short-term project work?

- "One way is through strong documentation, to go beyond object records and include past interpretation, research, contacts and perhaps even exhibition photos. Ideally, the use of an information management system that incorporates everything from acquisition information to copyright data and any interpretation produced can help to avoid duplicating so much work."

- "Project funding does not necessarily have to equate to short termism. Our Head of Museums, Libraries, Archives consistently makes the case for museums to think strategically"

- "short-term projects are of limited importance to the long term viability of museums. As such museums should lobby funders and stakeholders that only so much can be achieved"

Q6. What approaches are needed to decolonise collections over the next decade?

- "I am concerned by the word 'decolonise'. We can never decolonise museums nor should we attempt to, as we cannot change history. What we can do is be honest and genuine about how museum collections were formed, who they represent, and how they are (or aren't) represented."

- "Ideally we would like access to advice, from experts in national institutions, on how best to undertake decolonisation if the need arises."

- "Although each situation/object/museum is likely unique, general principles would be helpful – this is an area in which I think generally there is a lot of willingness to address within the sector, but fear of doing it wrong could be a big hindrance."

Q7. How can we achieve the best balance between internal and external input in contemporary collecting?

- "Clearly it is not practical to have every potential acquisition scrutinised by a community panel, but there should be community involvement in shaping the collecting policy and parameters."

- "Partnerships with schools, businesses and interest groups could offer a greater range of objects for the collection. A regional collections panel consisting of museum curators, members of community organisations and members of the public could make more representative decisions on collecting priorities."

Q8. How can museums continue to collect in an era of reduced funding?

- "By resourcing curatorial expertise museums can, relatively cheaply and strategically, recognise the important objects to acquire, as well as then having a passionate advocate to either fund raise (externally) or persuade the current owner to donate for the public benefit."

- "It is a serious and costly failure of national policy that the UK's 1,700 Accredited museums each has to make collecting (and disposal) decisions without any easy way of knowing what similar items there might be elsewhere. Where co-ordinating collecting does exist, it is ad hoc and usually dependent of the personal networks and knowledge of individuals."

Q9. How can museums take more risks with collections?

- "We can't take risks without factoring in time for staff to consider them. There are some great ideas from collections staff – but we often have to limit the reality because there isn't the time or resource to actually do them."

- "Is this necessary? It should be possible to better release the opportunity that collections offer without necessarily taking more risks. If there is a need to take more risks then we need to be prepared for the consequences, to have made a risk assessment and accepted possible consequences."

Q10. How can museums improve the knowledge they hold about their collections over the next decade?

- "The reality is that many curators need to be generalists today and knowing where to go to find the specialist information and having the correct technical infrastructure (good CMS and storage) to manage that information when it enters the museum is key."

- "The model of specialist Curators is certainly no longer a reality in most museums but giving more generalist Curators the opportunity to have time to research individual areas is essential if collections knowledge is to grow and strengthen over the next decade."

Q11. How can museum staff be empowered to undertake ethical disposal?

- "The sector as a whole should reduce the shame factor of disposal. It should be that organisations feel supported when they are doing this rather than the fear that they will do it wrong and be criticised."

- "Maybe we should start calling it "object re-homing". An object that has been recklessly acquired in the past may well have better relevance in a new home, such as another museum or even, a local history society's collection or a university."

Q12. How can museums make the case for the public benefit of their non-display collections?

- "I think the issue here is more about public trust in museums and the feeling that we are hiding peoples heritage. My argument is always it's not just for us but the generation in 100 years time too, but I think the public then need to be involved in the decision making of what gets to survive for the next 100 years. I think we need to be more transparent about the objects in storage, our decision making processes and alternative ways to make them accessible."

- "There needs to be a change of perception from "on display is good, in storage is bad" amongst all staff. Perhaps museum stores should be thought of as the 'reference library' i.e. just another venue or part of the museum that is accessible but in a different way"

EMPOWERING COLLECTIONS

- Empowering Collections

- Relevant Collections

- Dynamic Collections

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1
A culture change in museums and collections practice

"Collections work should never be done 'for the sake of it'; the 'use' of our collections is increasingly the focus of our work... and therefore the 'usefulness' of our collections (and our collections work) should be at the forefront of our planning."

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2
A proactive approach to the democratisation and decolonisation of museums

"Although museums have addressed some of these issues over the last 20 years, it is only now becoming an explicit part of museum agendas. One practical area we can address is changing the content, tone and terminology of the colonial histories that some collections reflect. We will need to undertake provenance research, conduct collaborative research with source communities, and we will need to consider how we can support a more diverse range of voices in our curatorial decisions."

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3
A focus on reinterpretation of out-of-date displays

"People visiting museums want to see someone like them in the displays so we need to be proactive in consistently telling stories"

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4
Research to understand public expectations of collections

"People feel empowered when they can relate to something or can influence something. We need to try to find out what people want to see and how they might want to get involved."

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5
Strategic collecting in partnership with communities

"Seeing yourself represented in culture is necessary to value and want to participate in it. Strategic collecting from underrepresented groups and additional narratives on existing collections are needed."

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6
A strategic approach to online collections

"Make collections as open as possible, especially where communities might be local, national and international. Make their content easy to share and re-use by taking down paywalls and providing open licensing. Within many museums, a digital touchpoint can have as much, or more value, than a physical visit."

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7
Use collections projects to create social impact, embed knowledge and build legacy

"The biggest impact funders and policy makers could make would be providing long-term rather than short-term project support. This would allow museums to plan and deliver sustainable projects which could really make an impact, and have the advantage of allowing staff to build and retain collections expertise."

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8
Support partnerships and knowledge sharing

"The reality is that many curators need to be generalists today and knowing where to go to find the specialist information and having the correct technical infrastructure (good CMS and storage) to manage that information when it enters the museum is key."

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9
Improve training and funding for the rationalisation of museum collections

"The sector as a hold should reduce the shame factor of disposal. It should be that organisations feel supported when they are doing this rather than the fear that they will do it wrong and be criticised."

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10
Improve transparency and accessibility of museum collections online

"It is a serious and costly failure of national policy that the UK's 1,700 Accredited museums each has to make collecting (and disposal) decisions without any easy way of knowing what similar items there might be elsewhere. Where co-ordinating collecting does exist, it is ad hoc and usually dependent of the personal networks and knowledge of individuals."

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11 Explore shared storage solutions

"There needs to be a change of perception from "on display is good, in storage is bad" amongst all staff. Perhaps museum stores should be thought of as the 'reference library' i.e. just another venue or part of the museum that is accessible but in a different way"