

Museums

Policy from Practice

Across the country, museums are fuelling the cultural life of the nation. They promote scholarship, inspire an interest in different cultures, bring history to life, provide a vital educational resource and contribute to urban and rural regeneration. Museums are also fun! More than two in five adults visited one in 2005 and 80% found their visit exciting.

The National Trust believes that the country's museums have the potential to do much more. The Trust is the largest accredited museum authority in the country and many of the issues we face affect the museum world as a whole. Using National Trust examples this briefing highlights the benefits museums provide and identifies some of the challenges facing the sector. It shows how the National Trust will contribute to the sector and makes recommendations on how to move forward.

The National Trust: A National Museum

Housing an extraordinary treasury of over one million objects, the Trust's world-class collections demonstrate the UK's significant involvement in the arts, in trade and industry and in world affairs. From major works of art to everyday items, vast libraries to intriguing archaeological finds, the Trust cares for a wealth of collections capturing human endeavour over the ages.

The National Trust's museums:

- comprise 8.5% of the country's registered museums
- include a unique collection of Huguenot silver at Dunham Massey, an Edwardian greengrocer's 'time-capsule' semi-detached home at Mr Straw's House in Worksop, and Erno Goldfinger's modernist collection at 2 Willow Road, London
- provide important local educational resources and host hundreds of thousands of formal educational visits annually
- inspire tens of thousands of volunteers to help look after, interpret and open them to the public
- are located throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland, forming a dispersed 'national' collection
- provide free entry to 3.4 million members.

Collections in context

The National Trust bridges the worlds of art, heritage and museums by displaying the vast majority of its collections in the places for which they were originally acquired. We provide 'the real thing' in ways that maintain the personal links with properties and those who lived and worked within them. We reflect the diversity of the museums sector beyond the large municipal organisations generally recognised by the public.

Many Trust properties are also an ensemble of historic house, parkland, gardens and wider functional estates, forming part of the fabric of the communities in which they are located. Thus the Trust is well placed to demonstrate how museums can help foster powerful links between individuals, communities, and their own heritage.

Money and resources

Significantly, as a registered charity, we have no direct core funding from the Government, but rely upon self-generated income from endowments, estate management, membership subscriptions, legacies, gifts and grants – making the support of our volunteers all the more vital.

Following accreditation of the National Trust as a museum authority in December 2005, we are focusing our efforts on ensuring properties are meeting required standards in forward planning and user services including information; interpretation and learning; visitor facilities and collections management.

Despite increasing evidence of the public value of museums, we face the same problems as others in a sector beset by mounting costs, growing liabilities, increasingly high visitor expectations and threats to funding and resources. Following the recent focus on museums by DCMS there is now an opportunity to develop a contemporary vision for museums which reinvestigates a shared sense of

- Learning from experience
- Future challenges for the museum sector
- A way forward



responsibility for our cultural heritage at local, regional and national level.

This should be stimulated by a new Museums Strategy that develops a broader understanding of the nature of the museums sector, demonstrates the role of museums across a wide range of Government priorities, underpins the resources required and helps the sector deliver the wide public benefits they provide. The next section summarises some of the benefits provided by museums, drawing on the Trust's experience in England.

CASE STUDY

Wordsworth House, Cumbria: Award-winning interpretation creates the single most successful aspect of the property, which is everything that you might hope to find in a museum – busy and alive with chatter and laughter.



Learning from experience

Providing access to our collections

The Trust puts a strong emphasis on learning opportunities at our properties. Research shows that 93% of visits deliver informal learning outcomes. We are listening more and involving people in the way we present, interpret and look after our properties and collections. For example, Wightwick Manor responded to the suggestions of a Punjabi Ladies Group from Wolverhampton to highlight the hidden histories of two Indian princesses who married into the family. At the Workhouse in Southwell, interactive displays give visitors a chance to share their experiences and reactions. The Heritage Lottery Fund supported 'Whose Story?' in the West Midlands and the Untold Story projects have shown how using the performing arts and targeting resources can help new audiences make connections between heritage sites and their own lives (see case study).

Across the Trust we have long term links with schools to create opportunities for school children to develop their potential, their ambition, their creativity and imagination through

contact with 'the real thing'.

For example, the Schools Arts Partnerships uses National Trust properties to generate creative projects with two local schools of contrasting social and economic backgrounds. We also help with the more practical logistical issues. Our school transport schemes in the north west and south east of England helped offset the increasing burden of transport costs for schools, especially in rural areas.

In recent years, the establishment of the MLA's Generic Learning Outcomes has provided a useful cross sector approach for measuring the impact of our learning programmes. This could be further improved by making the Inspiring Learning for All toolkit easier for busy staff and volunteers to get to grips with.

We are also exploring the potential of technologies and innovations such as MP3 players, downloads and blogs to open up access and planning public online access to the Trust's collections.

Conservation costs

The Trust has a world-wide reputation for its expertise in collections care with

our *Manual of Housekeeping* seen as the reference source for conservators worldwide. Providing collections and building conservation of this standard comes at a high price in terms of human and capital resources.

The Trust has an estimated backlog of conservation work that amounts to £75 million for our collections alone. For example, just one seventeenth-century tapestry from Blickling Hall will take approximately 26 months to repair, with four people working on it at a cost of £90,000.

But the investment is worth it, not only for the intrinsic value of these collections but also because of their popularity and the wider benefits they can bring. We have found that combining internal and external resources is most cost-effective. Thus we invest our staff resources in preventive conservation and managing remedial conservation programmes that are carried out by freelance conservators. The Blickling Textile Conservation Studio is our only in-house conservation facility. At our properties, the benefits of more costly remedial conservation are maximised by minimising deterioration through ongoing preventive conservation

managed by conservators. We are doing more to show and explain the sheer scale of our conservation work in action: by 'Behind the Scenes' tours; 'Putting the House to Bed' days; and carrying out remedial conservation in front of our visitors. Feedback suggests this greatly enhances the visitor experience.

Vital volunteers

Volunteers are vital to our museums. Without them we would be unable to open up our places to the public as we do. Across the Trust volunteers contribute 2.5 million hours of their time each year and undertake a diverse variety of tasks: including welcoming visitors and interpreting our properties; conservation cleaning; archiving and research; and running learning and formal education events. Volunteers also bring local knowledge and understanding to the museums, so enhancing the visitor experience.

In return they get a chance to put something back into the community, to make a difference and to make friends.

Working together

Partnerships with external organisations offer opportunities to share knowledge and good practice across the sector, whilst helping increase public access to collections. The National Trust has a number of valuable partnerships, including research projects and training courses, as well as working with other museums on exhibitions, such as the popular Turner at Petworth exhibition with the Tate in 2002, which attracted 100,000 visitors and includes work with the National Portrait Gallery at Beningbrough and Montacute (see case study).

In our experience, effective links between individual museums are best made at the local level, with regional

support where necessary. The role of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council at the regional level is an important catalyst to bringing partners together in England. We have worked successfully with the West Midlands Hub on providing training and we see great potential for the Renaissance in the Regions Museum Hubs as a valuable resource for joint working and training. It is important that this initiative is now taken to the next layer of museums which have not yet been reached, providing recognition and investment for the work of small and medium sized museums particularly in rural areas.

We also believe there needs to be clearer direction for how the Specialist Networks might strengthen and develop their role. The close professional links we have with other historic house museums cultural organisations could be encouraged to develop further.

CASE STUDY

Guido Reni ceiling painting: Over 1,000 visitors came on the opening weekend to see the results of one of the most important art conservation projects in a National Trust property (project cost £95,000).



CASE STUDY

The Untold Story – life-changing experiences

By using our museums for creative interpretation and real experiences we have found that working in partnership with local communities can lead to powerful, life-changing and inspirational results. Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Untold Story showed how unlocking stories about objects in the places for which these were originally acquired can drive very

powerful social change. Working with groups who have not been involved with the National Trust before, the project used performing arts as a way for participants to discover their heritage.

In 2004 women from the South Asian Community of Derby and students from a local school worked in partnership with Surtal Asian, a South Asian Arts organisation based in Derby, on the Eastern Museum collection at Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire. Entitled 'Mayura' (peacock-like), the project

involved the women in creating their own interpretations of the objects collected by Lord Curzon who oversaw the first partition of Bengal.

The project resulted in permanent changes being made to the interpretation and display of the collection, and an invitation to screen the final dance performance at the Asian Dance Connect event in Derby. English and Hindi poetry and textile art created by the women formed the basis of a fresh exhibition at the museum in 2005.





CASE STUDY

The National Trust and the National Portrait Gallery – working together

The Trust's 25 year partnership with the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) is an enriching experience for both partners, enabling members of the public who would not normally visit London-based national museums, to view and interact with nationally important paintings. More recently funding from the DCMS /

DfES strategic commissioning scheme has created vibrant new learning and interpretation projects at the two Trust properties – Beningbrough and Montacute – that work with the NPG. Each project has included formal education, interpretation for families, outreach with new audiences and community engagement. One successful innovation at Beningbrough is Making Faces: Eighteenth Century Style; a new interactive set of galleries combining high and low tech

interpretation brings to life the property's outstanding collection of 18th-century portraits. Visitors can see some of the NPG's collection which would otherwise be in London in an annually changing display or take a virtual tour of the whole collection. Or they can try their hand at modelling with different sculpture materials or use new software to commission their own eighteenth-century style portrait.

Future Challenges

In this section we identify some of the key challenges facing museums:

Acquisition and retention

The benefits museums provide depend fundamentally on being able to keep and care for collections. At 50 properties we own less than half of the collections on display. This means the integrity of collections is at risk from being dispersed or sold. While some safeguards exist to address the loss of single prestigious objects to overseas markets, there is little to address the loss and dispersal of collections from their local or historical context.

The Acceptance in Lieu (AIL)

mechanism, which enables works of art and historic chattels to be offered to the nation in lieu of tax has proved to be a powerful tool, attracting owners keen to safeguard their collections in perpetuity whilst reducing tax bills. There has been resistance to extending such measures on the basis that too few people are seen to benefit. Addressing this perception and increasing understanding of the public benefits of looking after objects and collections will help move the focus of debate from the tax benefits offered to owners to the public benefits provided by access to objects and collections.

Widening and engaging audiences

Long term political and public support of the contribution being made by

museums depends on them responding to changing public needs and wants and reaching out to new and different audiences. Definitions of what is considered historically or culturally significant constantly change and so how the sector interprets and uses its collections needs to adapt and respond. People are also expecting higher service standards and to be more involved in both the choices we make and in the management of collections. This demands changes in everything from how we debate future choices and provide more virtual access to undertaking conservation work in public and changing opening times.

This can be resource intensive and many of the best projects we have

been involved with have been entirely reliant on one-off funding. The lack of long term investment in this work to allow the connections generated to become established is a major obstacle. This investment supports the required staff time and commitment to building relationships, organisation of specific activities as part of a tailored offer, training requirements and in many cases the need for professional expertise.

Skills and training

Real steps have been made in the provision of good quality training and development opportunities for museum professionals. Our partnership in the HLF/ICON bursary scheme is helping contribute to addressing skills shortages but there is a persistent shortage of skills amongst both professionals and volunteers. There is a particular need for more opportunities for museum professionals to gain experience of management and leadership and in developing engagement skills.

Under-representation of minority ethnic and other excluded groups in the workforce and governance of cultural organisations is also a real concern for the sector that needs to be addressed.

Volunteers

Volunteers cannot be taken for granted. They are expecting more from their donation of time and demographic changes means that we need to plan

CASE STUDY

Back to Backs, Birmingham: Using volunteer local guides and their real life experiences delivers a much more rewarding visit.

Opposite: A Conservator vacuuming a tapestry chair seat using a special museum upholstery tool at Osterley Park, London. Since 1999, the National Trust has been undertaking scientific research into how dust affects historic surfaces in houses. Contents are vulnerable to dust because they are on open display, instead of being protected within display cases.

for different volunteers in the future. In attracting the next generation of volunteers, museums will need to give careful thought to meeting their needs and expectations, by providing a menu of roles, embedding minimum standards and providing effective management and training.

Sustainability

Understanding what sustainability means is arguably the most important priority for museums in the next few years. This means getting to grips with all three aspects of sustainability: economic, social and environmental.

Environmental considerations such as the effects of climate change and rising energy costs will have an increasingly significant impact on museums - particularly for museums in historic buildings. Yet the area where museums have made the least progress is in their environmental practices.

Alongside the actions that have been taken to minimise the effect of flooding, torrential rainfall, increased summer temperatures, and changes in ranges and numbers of insect pests, museums will also need to reduce their energy consumption in response to climate change.



CASE STUDY

Chambré Hardman Photographic Studio, Liverpool: Award winning conservation of the photographs safeguards a unique visual record of Liverpool's history.

Right: Photograph of HMS Ark Royal, taken from the top of Holt Hill in Birkenhead, by Chambré Hardman.



A Way Forward

The National Trust is committed to the task of unlocking the potential of museums and collections – for today's and future generations to enjoy and benefit from. If we are to continue to make the most of the unique cultural inheritance in the care of the UK's museums then we need to address the challenges they face. The National Trust will work with both national and local government, regional agencies and relevant bodies within the sector to help deliver the recommendations below.

Unlocking public value

- DCMS to commit to promoting the role of museums to the nation's quality of life, including stronger recognition and support for the key role museums play as part of the essential infrastructure in new and existing communities, in encouraging more active citizenship and in contributing to contemporary debates about community and identity.
- The MLA to invest more support and resources helping to unlock the potential of the voluntary and local independent museum sector infrastructure as part of the national strategy for museums.

- The museums sector to develop and use consistent methodologies for understanding the social contribution of museums and their public value and demonstrating the benefits of public investment.
- DCMS and the Cabinet Office to work with the museums sector on research into the effectiveness of tools to engage local communities in the work of museums, and into the role volunteering can play in attracting new audiences.
- The museums sector to work with funding bodies such as HLF to improve provision and develop new funding models for organisations who

wish to collaborate on outreach projects so they can sustain relationships with new users beyond the lifetime of individual projects.

- DCMS and DfES to work with the sector on addressing barriers, such as transport needs, which prevent schools using museums and obstruct the Government's commitment to out-of-classroom learning.

Safeguarding collections

- The Government to implement more fully the recommendations of the Goodison Review to provide incentives to retain collections and develop the role of 'lifetime legacies'



in providing further ways of gifting works of art and collections to the nation.

- The museums sector to continue to embody academic excellence and research by developing staff capacity in key areas, including specific curatorial fields.
- The museums sector to improve sharing of knowledge and expertise by developing joint research initiatives across organisations, in part through the Arts and Humanities Research Council.
- DCMS to help the sector build capacity to maintain collections and address the backlog of conservation needs, including through the potential of public funding to provide for permanent endowment to care for collections as well as support for specific conservation projects.

Working better together

- The MLA to commit to working with English Heritage and other heritage and arts sector bodies – to share resources and expertise; establish common objectives; and provide wider support for the wider sector.
- DCMS to establish a national cultural forum – that reflects the make-up of

the English Regional Cultural Consortia – to coordinate and develop cross sector activity and policy development and delivery.

- DCMS to ensure that the next Renaissance in the Regions programme extends its work with small and medium museums, particularly in rural areas.

Growing volunteers

- The museum sector to work closely with volunteering agencies to fund and develop guidance, support and training for the management of museum volunteers.

Developing the workforce

- Creative & Cultural Skills, the sector skills council, to accelerate and implement a strategy for tackling skills shortages in the sector, and supporting training provision for newly qualified museum professionals.
- Access to educational funding to be increased to broaden the apprenticeship model so that it includes post-graduate internships and mid-career training, and develops the practical skills and specialisms needed to fill current skills shortages.



- MLA and the Museums Association to provide more positive-action training schemes such as the Diversify programme.
- Expansion of the training programmes developed by Hubs, such as the West Midlands Hub, Renaissance at Work, to be extended to all regions with joint schemes developed between historic house museums and museums hubs to train staff in the care of historic houses and their collections and promote and encourage effective leadership.

Addressing climate change

- The MLA to establish an adaptation framework working in partnership with others and based on research which identifies key risks and establishes an action plan for museums most at risk.



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Top: Illustrating a story of religious persecution and immigration, the finest collection of Huguenot silver in Britain can be found in its original settings at Dunham Massey.

Left: The larder at Mr Straw's House, Worksop

Cover picture: A chair from Erno Goldfinger's modernist collection at 2 Willow Road

Other topics in this series:

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