**Museums Association**

**Submission to Welsh Government call for evidence on ways in which cultural and heritage bodies can contribute to reducing poverty**

**October 2013**

The Museums Association is the membership organisation for UK museums and people who work for them. We are a membership organisation, formed over 120 years ago in 1889, and we receive no regular government funding. We have almost 450 individual members in Wales and 32 Welsh museum services in membership.

We welcome the preparation of a report recommending ways in which cultural and heritage bodies can contribute to reducing poverty. Apart from recent work in Wales around museums and child poverty, the role museums could explicitly play in reducing poverty has not been systematically addressed, so the report promises to be valuable for the museum sector. We will not here repeat information included in Amgueddfa Cymru’s *Strategy for supporting participation in cultural activities for children, young people and families in poverty 2012-2015*.

The Museums Association has recently published Museums Change Lives, our vision for the improved social impact of the museum sector <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives> . This sets out key principles, and key steps to take, for museums increasing their social impact. It demonstrates the wide range of social impacts museums can have, although does not specifically address reducing poverty.

Here, we address the ways in which museums can contribute to reducing poverty under three headings: inclusion, education/learning and economic and community regeneration.

**A Inclusion**

Probably the most important step museums can take to contribute to reducing poverty is to increase engagement with people who are in poverty. It is well established that people from lower socio-economic groups remain significantly less likely to visit museums than people from higher socio-economic groups. This is evident in, for example, Taking Part data for England (there does not appear to be comparable data for Wales).

Museums can serve as agents of inclusion, giving people a sense of belonging to communities and to wider society and therefore less marginalised – all factors that can help people to take steps out of poverty. However, museums can also act as inadvertent agents of exclusion, failing to serve and meet the needs of certain groups and failing to include content relevant to their lives and experience. Many museums have content that may serve to deter and exclude ‘non-traditional audiences’.

Many museums have worked hard to become more inclusive in their content, activities and their approach to audiences. There are a great many examples, including Tyne and Wear Museums, Glasgow Museums, National Museums Liverpool, Ceredigion Museum, the Museum of the Manchester Regiment, and the Museum of East Anglian Life.

There is growing interest in UK museums in participatory practice in which a greater range of people play a part in contributing to and shaping a museum’s work and content. This can be powerful in inclusion terms and there is great potential here as shown in the Our Museum initiative and Happy Museum project: <http://www.happymuseumproject.org/> [ourmuseum.ning.com](http://www.ourmuseum.ning.com) ‎

We hope that the report will recommend that all museums in Wales set and report on targets for increasing engagement with people from the lowest socio-economic groups. We hope too that the report will recommend that museum funders and policy makers support museums in this area.

**B Learning and Education**

Educational attainment is a strong determinant of poverty and is also a string determinant of museum visiting. This means museums need to take active steps to reach people of lower educational attainment.

Positively, there is some evidence that museums can engage young people in learning and purposeful activity when schools may have struggled. For example, some museums, such as Orleans House in the London borough of Twickenham work successfully with pupil referral units to engage excluded pupils with learning.

However, it is rare for a museum to specifically set out to have a significant impact on educational achievement in its catchment area. We hope that the report will explore the potential for this. It might, for example, be useful to consider recommending establishing pilot areas in Wales where museums (possibly working with the wider cultural and heritage sector) could be supported to attempt to make a significant and specified contribution to re-engaging excluded young people in education. There may be some evidence to draw on from the Find Your Talent programme of cultural education; however as the programme was prematurely curtailed there may not be a rigorous evaluation of its impact <http://www.findyourtalent.org/news/2010/12/final-reports-find-your-talent-pathfinders>

It is important to be aware that museum work to increase inclusion and learning attainment for non-traditional audiences can sometimes risk being undermined by attempts to generate income and attract high-spending cultural tourists. As a small, simplistic illustration: from a tourism and income-generating perspective it may make sense to have a high quality and expensive catering offer- but this will send exclusionary messages to poorer audiences (as well as, in very practical terms, making visiting unappealing if a cup of coffee and a snack for children is unaffordable).

**C Economic and community regeneration**

In certain circumstances, museums can contribute to economic regeneration. Ancillary expenditure by museum visitors can increase expenditure in local businesses, a local purchasing policy can increase incomes of local suppliers or goods and services, museums can opt to require suppliers to pay the living wage rather than just the minimum wage, and museums can opt to train and employ local people (although it is distressing to observe the growth in museums using zero hours contracts and agency-provided workers as a cost cutting measure.)

Museums can also contribute to place and community regeneration. They can be an ‘anchor’ presence in regeneration areas (such as the Waterfront Museum in Swansea), they can bring life and activity to declining high streets and they can give a purpose to neglected historic buildings.

However, it is not automatic that regeneration activities reduce poverty. Great care, and careful strategy and planning needs to be taken to ensure that regeneration activity has anti-poverty impacts. For example, it will do little to counter local poverty if a museum merely serves to attract guests to internationally owned hotel and restaurant chains that pay low wages on zero hours contracts (the majority of people in poverty are in working households). A museum that attracts well educated tourists can run the risk of making marginalised local people feel yet more excluded.

Museums can also contribute to community regeneration by playing a role in building skills – see for example the Museums Association report Culture Change, Dynamism and Diversity, available on the Museums Association website: <http://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/15042011-culture-change> . The Museums Association website also includes information that may be of interest in the Museum Practice section on museums working with homeless people, on community projects and with youth panels.

**D Further questions**

We’d like to offer brief answers to the following questions, which may be of interest:

1. What does a scalable national model to address this look like?

*If the work is to be taken seriously then national targets and a national framework will be essential, within which individual organisations can play a role.*

2. Are we trying to reduce poverty, or to overcome the disadvantages that poverty brings in its wake?

*The ambition surely has to be to reduce poverty – and as suggested above museums can probably best do that by addressing some of the disadvantages, such as social and cultural exclusion and low levels of learning, that might* lead *to poverty.*

3. How far can a government go in requiring cultural organisations to contribute to a national programme?

*Government has little power to require cultural organisations to do anything, other than as part of a funding agreement, which suggests that to stimulate action in this area government would need to have defined streams of funding, or add conditions to existing streams of funding (such as funding to museums and cultural organisations from CyMAL, Cadw, ACW and funding to Amgueddfa Cymru.*

4. Are schools, or families/carers, the key to achieving change for children?

*Increasing the opportunities, aspirations and social and cultural capital of children is probably the way in which museums and cultural organisations can best contribute to reducing poverty.*

5. What are the development needs of the key professionals from different sectors who will need to work together towards the chosen goals?

*The key will be for museums and cultural organisations to work in partnership with organisations that already have the skills to work effectively with key client groups who are in poverty or at risk of poverty. If this approach is taken, the development and skill needs may not be all that great, although some in the culture sector may need development to increase their confidence in working effectively in partnership and meeting the needs of their partners so that museum resources can be used to their full potential.*

6. How important is local provision, and what if anything is the role of national organisations?

*Local provision will be essential, to reach people in their localities. National organisations can play a key role encouraging, supporting (and possibly funding) local organisations.*

We’d be delighted to help further; please contact Maurice Davies, head of policy and communication, Museums Association: maurice@museumsassociation.org

[www.museumsassociation.org](http://www.museumsassociation.org)