

Museums Association

Submission to Scottish National Strategy Consultation

November 2011

Summary

- We agree wholeheartedly with the consultation document that museums exist for public benefit and applaud the ambition that the eventual strategy will be seen as 'a renewal of the contract between museums and society'
- The strategy should primarily address the need and mechanisms for Scotland's museums to be *relevant* by having improved impact and to be *resilient*, or sustainable
- The strategy should have a simple structure. The objectives should be ambitious, potentially measurable and fewer in number
- The strategy should clearly address issues of funding in both the short and longer term and build a case for improved long-term stable funding
- Funding bodies, particularly national funding bodies, need to offer longer term funding, tied to transformation and collaboration
- The strategy should consider the potential benefits of long-term central funding for outward-looking, collaborative, supportive Centres that give support to others, focus improvement and build collaboration with the clear aim of increasing impact on individuals, communities and society
- The National Development Body must be able to powerfully engage with local authorities to argue for continued funding
- A move towards shared services, collections rationalisation, skill and knowledge sharing and collaborative programming is essential to counter the likely decline in service provision
- The new strategy must make explicit the sector-support roles of the new National Development Body, of NMS and of other large museums
- The strategy needs to encourage talent, advocacy, imagination and risk taking
- Museum staff need greater skills in community and audience engagement
- There is a need to focus on knowledge retention and knowledge sharing as people leave the sector
- The National Development Body should aim to be one of the key voices of museums in Scotland
- The National Development Body must co-ordinate and support the work of other organisations
- The National Development Body should focus on strategy, leadership, funding, advocacy and building collaborations. It should be less operational than Museums Galleries Scotland
- It is essential that a draft strategy is published for consultation. We would also like to see clearer consultation on the shape and functions of the National Development Body

1 Introduction

The Museums Association welcomes the consultation to inform the development of a national strategy. **We agree wholeheartedly with the consultation document that museums exist for public benefit and applaud the ambition that the eventual strategy will be seen as 'a renewal of the contract between museums and society'**. The value of museums is in their impact on individuals, on communities and on society as a whole.

We broadly agree with the majority of the analysis and context set out in the consultation document, although may differ on a few points. We welcome the recognition of the diversity of the museum sector, of the challenging operational environment, of the importance of partnerships and collaboration and of the growing importance of community engagement. We recognise the importance of making the best use of skills and resources, of increasing the ambition of museums and of increasing museums' visibility. We welcome the attention given to improving the use and impact of collections and the recognition of the importance of sustainability, both in terms of museums becoming more sustainable themselves and in terms of contributing to the sustainability of communities and wider society.

We do have a concern that the consultation document's combination of 'vision', 'guiding principles', 'themes' and 'objectives' is perhaps over-complex, especially as the eventual strategy document will also include more detailed actions. We hope that the suggestions we make below could help you develop a **simple structure for the strategy**.

However, we do not wish to focus on the details of the consultation document in this submission. Our understanding is that the consultation document is not itself intended to be a draft strategy, but instead 'a framework for discussion' that will inform the development of the strategy. We therefore are accepting the implicit invitation to submit our views on the contents of the strategy that is under development. We hope that this will help you in your thinking as you create a draft strategy and that you will then consult on that draft strategy.

The Museums Association is the only UK-wide organisation representing museums and people who work for them. We are by far the largest UK-wide organisation representing and supporting museums. We represent museums of all types from large nationals to small volunteer-run museums. We represent all types of museum staff from volunteers and interns to directors and board members. We have over 6,000 individual, institutional and corporate members in the UK, of which almost 500 are in Scotland. We receive no regular government funding and have been doing our work to help improve museums for the public benefit since 1889. To inform this submission we held an on-line consultation with our members. Museums Association staff or board members attended the launch of the consultation and both of the open consultation meetings.

2 Key aspects of the national strategy

We suggest that **the strategy should primarily address the need and mechanisms for Scotland's museums to be *relevant* by having improved impact and to be *resilient*, or sustainable.**

2.1 Vision

We therefore welcome the intention that the Vision should 'encapsulate the importance of increasing the role and impact of museums and galleries in society and ensuring their sustainability'. However, we do not think the current wording of the vision yet fully achieves that aspiration.

2.2 Objectives

We suggest **the objectives should be ambitious, potentially measurable and fewer in number.** They should all relate to the overall vision of relevant and resilient museums. For example:

Relevance/impact

Improve engagement with individuals through inclusive, high quality services, experiences and learning

Increase participation by communities

Improve contribution to local and national sustainable social and economic development

Act as ambassadors for Scotland's culture internationally

Resilience/sustainability

Improve use and development of collections to increase impact

Collaborate to achieve the greatest impact from available resources, including shared services and joint programming

Create a fit for purpose, diverse workforce with strong leadership

Secure long-term plural funding

3 Specific points the strategy should address

3.1 Funding

Our consultation with Museums Association members and other discussions suggest widespread support for the above objectives. The majority of them are already included in some way in the consultation document, but we note the absence from the consultation document of discussion of funding. The desirability of the strategy addressing funding was by far the most common comment made in responses to our online consultation. **We therefore strongly recommend that the strategy should clearly address issues of funding in both the short and longer term.**

Comments on funding made in response to our consultation include:

'Both individual museums and ministers need guidance, and sometimes should be told hard messages - positive and negative. At the moment funding and structure are "postcode lotteries", which isn't right. A clear lead from above would be very helpful.'

'The strategy should seek to ensure that museums are appropriately funded.'

'It should set out a clear strategic approach and encouragement/incentives to those museums following the recommended way forward.'

'Are there any consequences [for individual museums] for not reflecting/implementing/applying the strategy?'

It may appear that there will not be additional funding in the short term. However, it is important to recognise that the Heritage Lottery Fund has additional funding and that the Scottish Government has found funding to contribute towards the cost of the V&A in Dundee. The strategy should be ambitious in making the case for funding, even in the short term. It is surprising that the consultation document does not mention Heritage Lottery Fund who will be key partners in the delivery of future strategy for museums in Scotland.

But more importantly, the strategy should take a long-term view of funding. The strategy is taking at least a ten-year view - and in many ways may be a 'once in a generation' opportunity - so **the strategy should build a case for improved long-term stable funding.**

Museums in Scotland have suffered from short-term project funding which has offered temporary solutions rather than facilitating transformative change. **Funding bodies, particularly national funding bodies, need to offer longer term funding, tied to transformation and collaboration.** In developing proposals for transformational funding there are lessons to be learned from the Regional Development Challenge Fund, from some HLF funding and possibly from Renaissance in England.

Several responses to the Museums Association consultation recommend the strategy should include proposals for long-term central funding for non-national museums. **The strategy should consider the potential benefits of long-term central funding for outward looking, collaborative, supportive Centres that give support to others, focus improvement and build collaboration with the clear aim of increasing impact on individuals, communities and society.** Attention would be paid to regional equity and to an extent the centres could build on the work of the Regional Development Challenge Fund, which encouraged museums to work across local authority boundaries and across museum types. These supportive, collaborative Centres might be defined geographically, or be defined by subject. They would be excellent themselves in their public impact and would

also be receptive and responsive to the wishes and needs of other museums. They might be individual museums or consortia of museums and would offer a form of dispersed, collaborative leadership.

In line with changed strategic objectives, there will be a need to review the impact and effectiveness of previous funding for recognised collections, which perhaps focussed too much on individual museums and did not stimulate some of the longer term benefits for impact and sustainability that could have come from encouraging a more collaborative approach to collections use and development. Any future approach to supporting recognised collections, or supporting subject-themed collaborative centres, should have a strong focus on public impact and should fully involve the national collections.

In the short term, many museums in Scotland appear to be in decline, primarily as a result of cuts in local authority funding. Many local government museums appear to be on their knees. **There is an urgent need to address the decline in services at many museums. The new National Development Body must be able to powerfully engage with local authorities to argue for continued funding.** It must be able to effectively create collaboration and resource-sharing to protect public services when funding is reduced.

3.2 Collaboration

Many respondents to the MA's consultation mentioned the value of collaboration and networking. Comments include that the new National Development Body should:

'encourage working together to best benefit each and every museum.'

'tackle those museums who refuse to engage with others'

'bring greater cohesion and opportunities to the Scottish museum sector so it can work together with common purpose'

'support cross-promotion and joint projects'

There is an urgent need to increase impact while reducing costs, which means changes in working practices are essential. **A move towards shared services, collections rationalisation, skill and knowledge sharing and collaborative programming is essential to counter the likely decline in service provision.** The National Development Body needs to actively encourage service amalgamation where this can improve services.

As noted above, in developing proposals for collaborative working, it may be effective to build on the legacy of the Regional Development Challenge Fund.

3.3 The role of the nationals and others in supporting the sector

Responses to the MA's consultation called for the national museums and large museums, particularly Glasgow Museums, to

'support the sector through advice, skills sharing, loans and research'

'create placements for their staff in other museums'

'share resources between themselves'

'work in true partnership with other museums'

'support and share expertise with smaller organisations, to ensure the strategy's aims and objectives are achieved across the sector'

'become centres of excellence (as they indeed are at times already) available to support Scotland's museums in an agreed ways, and be funded nationally to do it.'

A significant minority of respondents urged nationals and other large museums to take care not to inadvertently dominate and act primarily in their own interests rather than that of the wider museum sector.

There is clear and welcome desire on behalf of the National Museums of Scotland to increase its impact throughout Scotland. NMS wishes to build on its advice, collections-sharing and training programmes. We welcome this and hope that the sector-support work of NMS, and of other large services, will be fully integrated in the national strategy. Hitherto there has perhaps been too much fragmentation in the sector support offered by Museums Galleries Scotland, by NMS and by others. **The new strategy must make explicit the sector-support roles of the new National Development Body, of NMS and of other large museums**, particularly National Galleries of Scotland and Glasgow Museums. It is important that these organisations' valuable support work does not include wasteful duplication, and as far as possible does not leave gaps.

While many in the sector call for a better system of advice and support, to share knowledge, expertise and skills and so improve the performance of individual organisations, it is important that this does not lead to dependency. It is far more important, and of far more public benefit, to nurture success and innovation than to attempt to prop up consistently failing organisations.

3.4 Impact and Public Benefit

It is critical that the strategy pays constant attention to impact and public benefit. It should be made evident how every action in the strategy contributes to improving museums' impact. For example, it is essential that activities such as collections care, collections knowledge and subject specialist networks are considered in terms of the ways in which they can improve 'real world' impact, rather than for their own sake. There is perhaps in the consultation document a mistaken assumption that collections knowledge is valuable for its own sake rather than for the impact it can enable museums to have. Collections knowledge is an enabling resource but it is not the purpose of museums. Collections knowledge is worth nothing if not shared and applied effectively and creatively by people who know how to communicate. Everything in the strategy should be tested to ensure it improves museums' engagement with individuals, participation with communities or impact on society.

3.5 Skills

A skilled, diverse workforce is essential to providing relevant, resilient museums. The workforce in Scotland appears to have lost its confidence. Very few people speak out about the future of museums. The workforce needs to be empowered to challenge existing ways of working. Museums need staff who are entrepreneurial and brave, with strong business skills. Museums need staff who will show leadership and voice their opinions. **The strategy needs to encourage talent, advocacy, imagination and risk taking.**

Museum staff need greater skills in community and audience engagement, for example to take full advantage of the possibilities of digital technology. A strategic approach needs to be taken to developing the next generation of museum workers, and to diversifying the workforce.

There is a need to focus on knowledge retention and knowledge sharing as people leave the sector. The MA's Monument Fellowships provide a model to learn from. This applies to collections knowledge and also to the craft and conservation knowledge often held by volunteers. Museums lag behind in training. Allied sectors have introduced a far stronger approach to skills development, such as Historic Scotland's new National Conservation Centre. Museums need to be able to know what they have, why they have it and why it matters in order to share it with an audience. This does not mean that museums need that knowledge in house. Museums need to develop collaborative models of knowledge, with greater collaboration within individual museums, between museums, with other organisations and with individuals and communities.

As spending cuts bite, museum staff in Scotland risk becoming increasingly isolated and to stimulate new and effective approaches to increasing the impact of museums, the strategy needs to include ways of improving networking between staff in different museums and with staff in other types of organisation.

3.6 Advocacy

Respondents to the Museums Association consultation identified the need for increased advocacy by and on behalf of museums. **The National Development Body should aim to be one of the key voices of museums in Scotland.** In the words of one respondent 'it should be an advocate for the sector - not afraid to shout and stir things up.' It will need to speak up for museums and act on their behalf in communicating with and listening to a variety of audiences including:

- Local government
- National government and its agencies such as Creative Scotland and Historic Scotland (Not only for funding and collaboration, but also to promote the central role museums play in exploring changing senses of identity in Scotland.)
- Tourist industry (Scotland has extraordinary rich museums and collections with unrealised potential for attracting tourists.)
- Media
- Creative industries
- Potential funders
- The education sector at all levels
- Heritage Lottery Fund
- Creative and Cultural Skills
- Other organisations with a remit in Scotland (such as Arts Council England for accreditation and cultural property).
- Appropriate international organisations

In addition, it needs to raise the public profile of museums and help museums better understand public views about and wishes for museums.

3.7 The National Development Body

We welcome the roles for the National Development Body (NDB) outlined in the consultation document. Critically, **the NDB must co-ordinate and support the work of other organisations** involved in delivering the strategy, particularly the national museums and any other museums and organisations funded to support the sector. The NDB needs to work closely with HLF, Creative Scotland, Historic Scotland, the Museums Association and other

organisations whose policies and funding have an impact on museums. The Museums Association would welcome a close working relationship with the NDB.

We are concerned that many decisions about the NDB appear to have been made before the strategy has been prepared. This seems inappropriate. The NDB needs to be recognisably different from MGS in its skills, knowledge, networks and approach. Careful consideration should be given as to whether the NDB should fund the national museums. Its governance needs to include people who can represent key elements of the museum sector and its users.

The NDB should confidently focus on strategy, leadership, funding, advocacy and building collaborations. It should be less operational than MGS, instead commissioning out many of its executive functions to other organisations.

4 Consultation

We have encountered some dissatisfaction with the limited scope of the consultation so far and hope that this can be remedied over the next few months. There is a feeling that the feedback form has limited people's responses and concern that consultation meetings have not been held outside the central belt.

As noted above, the consultation document is not a draft strategy. **It is therefore essential that a draft strategy is published for consultation.** If the sector is to support the strategy it is critical that it has a strong sense of ownership of the detail of the strategy. This will be enhanced if there has been a full and open consultation. **We would also like to see clearer consultation on the shape and functions of the National Development Body.**

The NDB and the strategy will get off to a far better start if there has been full and transparent consultation. The Museums Association would be pleased to help facilitate future consultation.

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