



Leading Museums:

a vision and strategic action plan
for English museums

JULY 15, 2009

Putting people at the heart of museums, and
museums at the heart of communities

1. Introduction

This National Action Plan for museums has been developed by the MLA, in consultation with DCMS, and with museums and their representative bodies.

It builds on the success of Renaissance in the Regions and plots a future where museums increasingly put people first. Where excellent regional and national museums work together to spread best practice, putting people at the heart of museums, and museums at the heart of communities. At the core of the Action Plan is the idea that museums should be less about keeping collections, and more about sharing them.

Museums ought to reach beyond institutional walls so curators can increasingly share knowledge and collections to spread enjoyable forms of learning. Audiences and users want to be proactive co-producers, not passive consumers.

The MLA aims to see national museums work in active partnerships with regional museums, and collections shared not only in how the stories are told, but also in practical ways through mobile exhibitions, loans and effective exploitation of digital technology.

It draws on *Understanding the Future* (published by DCMS in 2005 and 2006), which recognised many of the pressures facing the sector and set out some priorities. This sits firmly within a context of excellence, improvement and 'best practice' in culture for public benefit.

The Action Plan identifies ten key action points, underpinned by three main aims: Supporting excellence, promoting partnerships and building capacity.

2. Context

Developments in museums in the past decade have been positive and far-reaching. The professional community deserves credit for driving forward effectively in many areas.

Government has a responsibility to maintain its commitment to supporting and advancing the continuing revolution in museums. Sponsorship of national institutions, including university museums, partnerships with local authorities and funding for learning programmes and strategic commissioning will continue to be among top priorities, nationally and locally, even in the now much tighter spending environment.

Museums have a responsibility to understand and respond to social, demographic and economic changes. The expectations and behaviours of people who visit and use museums are changing fast. Coupled with a commitment to excellence and openness to participation in all forms, museums have to put people first and drive for greater impact, more relevant outcomes and higher efficiency.

Putting people first

People are at the core of all that museums do. Museums should reflect the trend for people to want to be not merely consumers, but producers, welcomed and engaged. Museums and their collections are vital in communities across the nation, with the potential to foster and strengthen family-positive opportunities for the spread of knowledge, learning, creativity and enjoyment.

The dramatic potential of collections to be central to public life will be fully realised through leadership at all levels, with more outward-focused working practices. The point is to create a demand for the use and understanding of collections. Overt collaboration between museums, libraries, heritage and science centres, archives and the visual and performing arts, can capture the public imagination, trigger fresh thinking and build up momentum. Online technologies and social media are central to this.

Recent initiatives that have strengthened engagement include the reinterpretation of collections for Stories of the World, for the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, and programmes for intergenerational and diverse audiences, such as Nights at the Museum and Kids in Museums. At the same time the success of the television programme *Who do you think you are?* highlights the compellingly personal nature of archival collections. But these are just a start.

2. Context

To achieve a more vibrant engagement with the public, museums need greater ambition, agility and clarity about reaching their various audiences. As places of learning and enjoyment, museums continually refresh and renew their engagement with existing audiences and must actively extend their reach to those who either aren't satisfied or who don't currently visit or use museums and their resources at all. The challenge lies in finding a balance between the maintenance of the authority of institutions and the sharing of their knowledge.

Working for excellence

The Renaissance in the Regions programme has made a significant start on raising quality, standards and professional confidence. The national funding has supported and built on a substantial ongoing investment by local councils across England. The signs of growth are impressive in museums everywhere, but the potential for even greater progress is now very much clearer, while the social need is greater than ever among people of all ages and backgrounds.

England's great regional museums need to continue to strive for true excellence for the long-term. The Accreditation and assessment processes need to be responsive to audience views. Reinvigoration of Subject Specialist Networks and better coordination of Museum Development Officers will both contribute to a process in which all museums foster a relationship based on professional respect.

Independent museums are a vital part of a mixed economy of museums across the country. These museums, large and small, are often the most flexible, dynamic and open to innovation. They also have a better understanding of the commercial context in which they survive. They should not be seen purely as the beneficiaries of bigger museums getting better, but rather as being equal partners in an exchange of skills and best practice.

The quality of all museums needs to grow and the very best museums must be seen to compete with comparator institutions across Europe and beyond. Results on this scale can only be achieved through stronger relationships between all kinds of collections. National museums have to be conscious both of their role as leaders – derived from the scale and quality of their collections – and of their need to exchange expertise, without unreasonable charges.

2. Context

Learning at the core

Trends in learning amount to a revolution, in which people of all ages have a thirst to acquire information informally. This era, with digital opportunities, provides museums with perhaps the best opportunity they have ever had to be recognised for their vital role in stimulating the spread of knowledge, developing conversations across ages and cultures and adding to the enjoyment of those who learn.

Museums are responding by opening up their spaces and resources in new ways. The role of museum staff is evolving from being “keepers”, controlling access, towards being sharers. The objective is to liberate collections and enable people to participate in interpretation and story-telling; and especially to broaden their appeal to non-traditional audiences from more diverse segments of the community.

Collections can be used in new ways if they are introduced beyond the walls of the institutions that over-protect them. Museums across the country already play a key role alongside other cultural organisations in the creative economy and in promoting social benefits and enhancing tourism, but more needs to be done to exploit the underlying opportunities, particularly in the towns and cities across England's regions.

Alongside creative collaboration with other professionals, for instance in business, film, architecture, theatre and design, conversations are needed with training bodies, for example for social services staff and teachers. These professions use objects on a daily basis, whether creatively in other media, in care homes for the elderly, or in classrooms and colleges across the curriculum. These connections are an essential part of demystifying and sharing the collections with many more people.

Scholarship and curatorship remain vital professional foundations, but engagement with the public makes all the difference. Stories become more vivid when people see their own history through the materials and when narratives are strengthened through dialogue with people from diverse backgrounds, age groups and social perspectives.

Museum training programmes need to develop the communication skills of curators, so that interaction with the public becomes more instinctive. Actor-interpreters are already popular in a wide range of roles, but professional presentation is costly and can reduce the scope for reflective participation by the public. On the other hand, wider use of volunteers increases the resources available overall, but museums need to be prepared to manage volunteers effectively and to encourage their development and ensure their integration.

2. Context

Delivering change

Change is unavoidable and requires new types of leadership. New, more entrepreneurial partnerships are needed for many museums and museum services to make them sustainable and truly responsive to the people they must engage more actively. In this, the style of governance and staff imagination are more critical than size or funding sources.

All museums, including those in local authority ownership, need encouragement and support to make stronger contributions to the creative and tourism economies, with greater freedom to develop learning and commercial partnerships. The public will gauge success, but museums need to maintain curatorial strength while spreading awareness and knowledge about their collections.

3. The vision

The vision that emerges from an understanding of these opportunities and challenges is for excellent national and regional museums that engage people and enrich lives and communities.

Actions are proposed in three areas:

- 1. Supporting excellence** – encouraging and rewarding museums nationally and especially regionally; to develop and use their collections to deliver the very best cultural experiences for the public, and particularly to create narratives for new and wider audiences.
- 2. Promoting partnerships** – strengthening the links between museums of all sizes; emphasising growth in regional museums and between museums and other cultural bodies; and building on the relationships with tourism and the creative economy.
- 3. Building capacity** – investing in leadership and professional development, in scholarship and collections care, in new finance and governance models, and in digital technology, to ensure effectiveness and sustainability for the long term.

4. Ten point action plan

1. Supporting excellence

ACTION 1

Public funding to follow excellence (Department for Culture, Media and Sport)

The adoption of “excellence” has shifted the focus of funders away from numerical targets towards assessment of the quality of experience and towards an appreciation of the cultural and social benefits of engagement.

Excellent cultural institutions are those that are innovative, risk-taking and international in outlook and that provide life-changing experiences to a wide audience.

A judgement-based peer-review system, coupled with a self-assessment process, is being evaluated for state-sponsored museums, and DCMS aims to extend its application in 2009/10.

Other funding agencies (MLA, local authorities, higher education) are planning to follow comparable approaches to making funding decisions based around the concept of excellence and in linked work such as the local government improvement strategy *A Passion for Excellence*.

The objective is to identify the very best museums across England and to support them to achieve even better results; smaller museums and those with limited capacities will be partnered with leading museums in order to deliver overall improvement.

ACTION 2

Developing and revitalising the Renaissance vision (MLA with Renaissance partners)

The Renaissance programme has been fundamental in creating a vibrant regional museum sector. The national funding has built on the substantial investment that is being made by local authorities and by universities.

The report of the MLA's independent Renaissance Review will be used to guide further developments in regional museums. Most of the recommendations of the Review that relate to administrative and procedural changes have already been adopted.

Recommendations to strengthen the leadership among museums will be evaluated and piloted. Leading museums will be identified to head partnerships that will be fundamentally important in enabling museums of all kinds to respond imaginatively to contemporary challenges.

4. Ten point action plan

Steps have already been taken for 2009/10 to strengthen the capacities of Renaissance museums, especially in relation to developing their collections and to delivering learning programmes.

Specific priority will continue to be given to developing museum leadership and professional capabilities and qualifications, with emphasis on skills and in-service education and training. Further measures will be considered to develop greater diversity in governance and in the workforce.

ACTION 3

Review and develop Accreditation (MLA)

MLA is reviewing and will develop its Accreditation standards scheme. The objective is to reduce its bureaucracy and to extend its scope to include a consumer view.

Accreditation remains a key driver for measuring and encouraging best practice for museum governance, entrepreneurship, collections interpretation, management, and sustainability.

Alongside Designation, the Accreditation scheme ensures that all museums can organise for improvement, develop their professional standards and respond to audience expectations.

Future funding allocations by MLA and others will be linked to the achievement of higher standards. Leading museums will be those that adopt the standards and drive for excellence.

ACTION 4

Strategic approach to collections management (Museums Association)

Museums will develop a more strategic and sustainable approach to collecting, collections management and care, and collections knowledge and research.

This will include acquisition, dispersal, disposal and more loans between museums, especially regional museums.

It will emphasise the need for relevance and for improving accessibility through imaginative public programmes and displays, with a greater degree of focus on regional accomplishments.

4. Ten point action plan

2. Promoting partnerships

ACTION 5

Enhancing national/regional partnerships (National Museums Directors Conference)

The NMDC will review the basis on which the national museums work in partnership with regional museums.

Fresh approaches will enable more national and regional museums to work together to ensure that collections, expertise and resources are used to maximise public benefit, nationally and regionally.

Emphasis will be placed on sharing and enhancing scholarship, knowledge and expertise, and on extending existing patterns of loans and touring exhibitions.

Working with the MLA, ways will be found to strengthen and establish additional Subject Specialist Networks.

ACTION 6

Museums at the heart of culture and public life (MLA)

Working with Arts Council England, English Heritage, Sport England and others, MLA will help to shape the contribution of the sector to regional policies, particularly the role that museums, alongside libraries and archives, have to play in place-making and building strong communities.

MLA will identify, and promote as best practice, examples of museums that: reach new audiences through re-interpretation of and re-presentation of collections; integrate with local authority improvement and regional regeneration; and contribute to well-being, learning and educational agendas, particularly for key programmes such as Find Your Talent, Living Places and the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad.

Particular emphasis will be given to the role of regional museums in narrating England's story.

4. Ten point action plan

ACTION 7

Promoting the role of museums as international ambassadors (NMDC, led by British Museum)

Many of our museums already operate internationally. The British Museum's World Collections programme is demonstrating how museums have a geopolitical role in encouraging international cooperation and integration.

Working in conjunction with MLA, further consideration will be given to encouraging and supporting regional museums to participate in international activity and collaborations.

DCMS will take the messages into Whitehall, championing the work of museums and ensuring that national policies reflect the full potential of museums.

3. Building capacity

ACTION 8

Developing leadership and the workforce (MA)

Leadership of museums remains key. Further steps will be taken to develop vigorous leaders at all levels, and to ensure greater diversity in governance and in the workforce.

The professional skills and qualifications of museum staff will remain a priority, with greater emphasis on in-service programmes for unlocking talent and increasing the capacity.

The MA has published a Cultural Heritage Workforce Action Plan, working with Creative and Cultural Skills and others, and will continue to promote and strengthen the approaches outlined in that report.

4. Ten point action plan

ACTION 9

Investing in the digital future (MLA)

Digital technologies enhance access to collections, support research and learning, and stimulate and renew interest in original objects. Public use of digital resources is extending rapidly, with new opportunities being presented continually in a highly competitive commercial market.

Through 'Digital Britain' the Government has expressed its strategic priority for digital development. The MLA will work closely with others to develop sector-specific responses.

Priority will be given to harnessing innovation, using the very best expertise, and avoiding waste and duplication. Regional capacity and skills development will be maximised.

ACTION 10

Promoting sustainable finance and governance (MLA)

Governance, leadership and income-generation models have to adapt to new circumstances.

The MLA will form an advisory group of people with business acumen to guide the development of entrepreneurial and income-generating programmes, especially in regional museums and across partnerships.

The MLA will also undertake a sustainability review, involving wide representation, including local government, to propose new ways in which museums can evolve and develop resilience and minimise their carbon footprint.

Building on *Private Giving for the Public Good*, MLA will work with NMDC and others to develop ways in which charitable giving to museums can be promoted and supported and new partnership models can be developed to generate income and share resources and services, especially in the regions.

5. Next steps

Working together

This Action Plan envisages a close alliance between all in the sector and their stakeholders, central and local government, national museums, university and independent museums, the Museums Association and the MLA.

The strategy recognises the leadership, investment and fundamental importance of local authorities. And it anticipates stronger links with related sectors including schools, colleges, universities, public libraries, archives, tourism, the arts, broadcasting and business.

Delivering the strategy will need action and commitment across all museums. MLA will convene a leadership group, chaired independently, to oversee a timetable with milestones that can be monitored and reported publicly. It is expected that this group will include membership from MLA, NMDC, MA, AIM (Association of Independent Museums), University Museums, NT (National Trust).

For more information or to get in contact with MLA visit www.mla.gov.uk



MUSEUMS LIBRARIES ARCHIVES
COUNCIL

Leading strategically, we promote best practice in museums, libraries and archives, to inspire innovative, integrated and sustainable services for all.

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
Grosvenor House, 14 Bennetts Hill, Birmingham B2 5RS
T: +44 (0)121 345 7300 E: info@mla.gov.uk

www.mla.gov.uk

ISBN 978-1-905867-30-1

Copyright MLA 2009

Registered Charity No: 1079666