



Curatorial Advisers' Conference

9 October 2002

Professional issues

1. Care of collections issues

- Documentation
 - There are too many choices on what ICT to use. Want more guidance on what is best.
 - Manpower problems - editing and inputting. For efficiency, one committed staff member is worth 10 who do not know what they are doing.
 - Doing basic documentation is low priority for funders, but no documentation means no access means no social inclusion.
 - Retrospective documentation is a finite task and to remove Scotland's backlog should be manageable without a huge input of resources. This would restructure what is possible in future, including contemporary collecting.
- Buildings
 - Buildings drain museums' resources. They are wrong for the services that need to be delivered from them. Need to change public and decision-maker perceptions from museums as old buildings to fill to museums as public services.
 - Restrictions on access. No realistic advice is available on how to meet disabled access requirements in historic buildings. Example cited of Historic Scotland advising that wheelchairs are brought in through a toilet.
 - Restrictions on space lead to bad storage and inefficient and ineffective working practices.
 - Maintenance is costly, time consuming, and there is too much technical jargon.
- Rationalisation
 - Rationalisation might be worth considering.

2. Building greater capacity

- Building greater capacity means the sector having the money, skills and people to do what the National Audit says we ought to be doing.
- Capacity is currently at a standstill or going down:
 - more to think about
 - less bodies
 - LA training and systems not effective
 - LA museums fail to access useful skill in other departments
- Museums do not have the capacity to deliver or even the capacity to invest in the necessary changes that will improve capacity.
- For there to be cultural change in LAs there must be good governance.
- Capacity is about having the right range of skills at the right time. To make the most of volunteers means hiring volunteer organisers; to take on projects means having project organisers. Larger organisations may have the range of skills in-house, but small ones do not.
- We need more:
 - skills exchange between organisations
 - freelance capacity
 - subject specialists.
- Future structures for the sector need to enable the skills sharing to happen. To do what the audit says requires us all to work together.
- Need more of everything.
- Museums are not optional.

3. The potential for ICT

- Huge potential via museum collections to develop ICT projects but must address documentation backlogs first and commit to continually sustaining documentation.
- The documentation backlog should be addressed as a whole using flying hit squads of documentation officers.
- We should agree a standard package for [collections management] software, as there is currently too much to choose from.
- A national unified database of Scottish collections, available to users.
- Central training.
- Opportunities for e-mail forums for exchanging information. ICT overcomes isolation.
- Need to develop programmes for knowledge input.
- ICT creates employment and so enhances the economic impact of museums.
- ICT creates opportunities for community participation, for exhibitions and to encourage creativity in visitors.

4. Standards and Performance Indicators

- There are a large number of standards in place already, some obligatory, and a constant deluge of new forms of accountability.
- Need more simplicity.
- Need to clarify standards terminology – for the grass roots.
- Local Authorities cannot escape from PIs, so museums need ones that really work for them.
- The sector needs meaningful PIs that demonstrate the value of museums in terms of their outcomes. Social and economic outcomes go unrecognised.
- The PIs for Local Authorities are unfair as not all have a museum development role to assist independent organisations.
- Validity of current PIs is in question. It seems no-one really cares, that they exist only for the public pamphlet.
- Should the government not fund the process of developing PIs for museums?