



## **Dumfries Consultation Meeting**

14 November 2002

Discussion concentrated on the key issues of funding, roles and structures, barriers to access and professional issues, such as training. The participants worked in two groups, the main points raised by the groups are reported below.

### **Group 1**

#### **Funding**

- For some core funding is defined as bare minimum to cover heating, lighting, essential repairs, rates and staff costs. Even curatorial duties/ stewardship a luxury for some of the independents, which rely on 'voluntary efforts' of seasonal staff. Core funding then is defined as what is needed 'for survival'. Others dispute this and argue that a museum is only a museum if it can both preserve a collection and offer access to it- no point otherwise. Marketing and education then become elements of essential core funding. Councillors subscribe to this view- why fund a 'mothballed' collection?
- Fall in tourism has been critical for many museums.
- Many have had to cut marketing budgets to make ends meet.
- Local authorities do not distinguish between museums and visitor centres- they are only interested in what they can contribute in economic development terms. But museums bear additional burden of costs of stewardship, and often of maintenance of historic buildings.
- Independent representatives raised the issue of Local Authority supporting national collections. Should funding be tied to important collections? - support for this in some cases. However, others wanted funding to be tied to visitor numbers - 'collections aren't everything, it's what you do with them.'
- 'Stabilisation' funding for the three industrial museums was described as a necessary 'short-term fix' but it is not seen as the way forward for museums as a whole.
- One councillor noted that too many museums had been developed without thought to future viability, with unrealistic projections. Decisions were made 'politically' and to suit 'planning' and 'regeneration' agendas but culture budgets had to 'rescue'. In the 70s/80s there was a complacent assumption that if you set up a museum, the Local Authority could always rescue you if need be.

## **Roles and Structures**

### **a) Local Authorities**

- There was strong support throughout the meeting for strengthening the role of Local Authorities in relation to museum support and funding. Partly this arose from a feeling of being remote from national agendas and decision-making processes, and from a desire to see better representation and stronger action at local/ regional level.
- However, by the end of the discussion session the group was agreed that a national intermediary agency was necessary. This should be an expanded remit for a better-resourced SMC. Its functions should include high-level advocacy, national strategy, development and raising and maintenance of standards.
- Such an agency would be most effective if linked to Regional Museums Development posts located in Local Authorities. SMC would manage this network of posts, whose remit could be loosely modelled on the Highlands and Islands Museums Development Post. The aim of the posts would be to forge partnerships between Local Authorities, and between different departments; to maximise museums potential contribution to tourism, learning etc. Links to tourist boards, and enterprise companies identified as particularly important.
- One representative commented that this meeting was the first time she had seen attendance at that level from across the region, and they needed more opportunities like this for facilitated development and exchange of ideas.
- Regional co-ordinators would be 'not a lot of money very well spent.'
- Such posts might also assist in the set up and co-ordination of regional networks/ or fora, which was identified as a key need in Dumfries and Galloway, so would also have a role in sharing expertise knowledge.
- Local Authorities are accountable, and this is seen as important.
- Local Authorities were the appropriate mechanism to channel funding to the independent museums in their area. What about authorities that offered no support/ minimal support to independents?
- The role of Local Authority curatorial advice to independents was explored - often goes unrecognised - what should the role be, and how can it be recognised? Curatorial Advisers could help at set up, pass on skills to volunteers, e.g. on basic documentation strategies.

### **b) National Intermediary Agency**

- Support for this (see above) but also strong feeling that there should be increased representation at local level, greater visibility of what national agency can do.
- Improved advocacy essential - we need to lobby the Parliament more effectively, and particularly in the run up to the next elections (2003).
- No strong views expressed on membership.
- Some support for SMC bringing voluntary heritage/ historical societies under its umbrella.
- Any new national intermediary agency should include the National Museums of Scotland and the National Galleries of Scotland. There was strong opposition to the idea that the nationals might not be included.

### **c) National Museums/ National Galleries**

- Main service that the non-nationals would like from the nationals is a 'less rigid approach to loans' and a greater access to Touring Exhibitions.
- The group echoed sentiments at the AGM in Aviemore that Discovery on the Move had been a great opportunity but that it was not an opportunity that was open to all, and that appropriate links and partnerships were missed at local level.

## Action Plan for Scotland's Museums

NMS need to avoid 'parachuting in'.

- Recognised that there seemed to be a willingness to change at NMS.
- Museums want equal partnership with the nationals, and would like to know what they have a right to expect.
- A database of curatorial expertise was suggested which should be maintained and mediated by the new national intermediary agency.

### d) Partnerships

- Dumfries and Galloway Council cited as a good council, and supportive in funding terms. Also good links between museums and tourism. However, there is still scope for greater collaboration, e.g. in the development of town trails. Is the Small Towns Initiative a useful model?
- Community planning process is viewed as still being in its early stages. There will be opportunities for museums to contribute but so far emphasis is on health/ education.
- Links with FE/ HE structures weak. The example was given of the Glasgow University campus on which the meeting took place- it is about to set up a school of Scottish Studies, with special Dumfries and Galloway section, yet the museum has not been involved in development.

## Professional Issues

### a) Buildings / Access

- LA representative - some collections need not be in the places they are - why do museums burden themselves with historic buildings, which are often 'unfit for purpose' and expensive to maintain? Would be costly to move- what alternative?
- Most museums taking a 'wait and see' attitude to the DDA - can't afford significant capital improvement, so do not plan to take action.
- More guidance and advice is needed on what needs to be done to conform to DDA- role for national agency/ Historic Scotland?
- Has there been any suggestion that Historic Scotland might contribute more to the running costs of museums in listed buildings? SMC group leader noted discussion at last week's Culture Committee, where the precedent of New Lanark had been mooted. Perhaps, there could be a bigger role for Historic Scotland in contributing to the capital costs of museums.
- Importance of having collections in their original context noted - e.g. Wanlockhead, and birthplace museums such as Burns Cottage. In other cases, arguably less important.
- HLF need to consider revenue funding.

### b) Training

- Identified as a big issue, and one that regional officers could help to address. Needs identified in areas such as: financial management; ICT; customer care / welcome host. LECs could probably help but it is a case of museums getting together more effectively to identify what they need from the LECS / find out what the LECS can offer them.
- Need for training to be geographically accessible, and timed to fit low season.

## Group 2

### Funding

- Setting up a new structure could absorb what little money there is. Prefer to use existing Local Authority framework to distribute money e.g. to independents.
- Some independents receiving no help on running costs from LA - also face dilemma on charging.
- Independents which are Registered should be awarded funding. Local Authority representative noted that 'they can apply for funding.'
- Councillor noted - there is a proliferation of museums, with no thought to viability.
- Independent museum noted - access to expertise is more of an issue than funding in some ways.
- No easy funding solution - strength in diversity of museum sector. Need to know what Resource is doing for Scotland - could funding be diverted from Resource for Scottish purposes?
- Loss would be international if we allowed a museum such as the Burns Museum to close - we need a strategy that recognises international importance of some of the collections.
- Need to argue for VAT exemption for independent museums.
- Need to address the issue of unrealistic visitor projections and *ad hoc* museum development.
- SMC needs to raise the profile of local museums. What about local promotion and advocacy?
- Arts funding lobby has skewed funding towards the arts - museums described as Queen of the South while the arts are Rangers / Celtic.

### Roles and structures

#### a) Local Authorities

- LA should set up a forum to exchange expertise, develop tourism strategy.
- Borders Museum Forum was described.
- Forum could make regional representation to national strategic body.
- National development body would set standards.
- Not keen on 'hub and spokes' model. Would prefer regional models - important to get Scottish Executive to understand the role of small museums.
- Wanlockhead is a nationally significant collection - can't expect Local Authority to foot the full bill.

#### b) National Agencies

- 'Close the nationals, and redistribute money locally.'
- Loans from NMS were described as 'ok' but had a significant cost in terms of staff time, accommodation, insurance etc. attached to them.
- SMC sends too much paper- what does that cost in terms of wages?
- SMC needs more money and should be a revenue funding body.
- SMC now less obvious in local areas - contact is on request or in response to SMC demands.
- SMC needs to support LAs / help them to convince their own departments that museums are worthy of support- advocacy role.
- Is SMC membership sufficiently inclusive? - should include historical societies.
- Need for strategic overview at national level- e.g. relationship between SMC, Historic Scotland, RCHMS.

## **Contributing to wider agendas**

### **a) Education**

- All agreed that education is a core activity.
- Museums offer free access to schools groups, but cost of buses and numbers needed for supervision, make visits difficult.
- All museums should have web presence- but what would be the cost of this? Need financial back-up to support.
- Students could work with museums more to gain work experience.
- There is a lack of finance to improve and upgrade interpretation to keep visitors' interest.
- Why is consumer interest in museums falling? - competition from other leisure / entertainment sources, and a lack of investment in museums meaning they find it hard to compete.
- Education centre in a 'B' listed building described as a 'liability'.
- Some museums describe inadequate space for learning activities, and inadequate capacity to develop trainees and volunteers.
- Marketing and cost of signage is also prohibitive for many museums.

### **b) Social Justice**

- Access to collections in local community is essential to promoting interest in museums, and social justice.
- Local museums can combat exclusion, especially in rural areas. Cost of travel, lunch etc to Edinburgh for a family day out is prohibitive for many.
- Uniqueness and diversity of local museums is a strength not a problem - we should use 'individuality' as a marketing point.
- Local communities have invested and donated to their local museum - they are involved at all levels. It does not automatically follow that they would feel the same commitment to a museum remote from the community - where it is as important as what it holds.