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# Report on Aviemore Consultation meeting

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## Scottish Executive Action Plan

Commissioned by the Scottish Museums Council

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# Scottish Executive Action Plan for Museums and Galleries in Scotland

## **Report on consultation meeting, SMC AGM, Aviemore, 24 October 2002**

### **1. Introduction and context**

Following the publication of the SMC-led “National Strategy for Museums in Scotland (January 1999) the Scottish Executive published a “National Cultural Strategy” in 2000. This Strategy committed the Executive to consider the promotion of sustainable funding in the museum sector and to examine the role of the industrial museums in Scotland. It also committed the Executive to “Review the existing statutory framework relevant to museums and galleries and consider the case for a comprehensive national framework” and to initiate a national audit of collections.

In furtherance of its commitments, the Executive launched a Strategic Change Fund in 2001 and directly grant-aided the three industrials with part of the SCF finances. It also funded the National Audit (published July 2002).

SMC launched a detailed consultation process around the SCF criteria. While yielding valuable guidance on criteria, an over-riding issue emerged at all the sector consultations, the need to develop a national framework to guide the development of Scotland’s museums.

The National Audit charted and confirmed a distributed collection of national importance, throughout Scotland. It equally demonstrated an uneven and inconsistent distribution of resources and frameworks to protect and communicate this collection.

In September 2002, The Minister for Tourism, Culture & Sport, Mike Watson responded to the clearly identified concern about a national framework and the inconsistencies shown by the Audit findings. He launched a consultation exercise “to assist the development of an Action Plan for Scotland’s museums and galleries”.

## 2. The consultation workshops

In addition to a major one-day conference on 4 November, the Scottish Museums Council is holding four consultative meetings on the Action Plan at Falkirk, Dumfries and in Perth and at the AGM of SMC at Aviemore. The Facilitator was commissioned to attend and facilitate the Aviemore meeting and to write up the outcomes in report form. The meeting was well attended by 62 registered participants.

Minister Watson defined four key areas for consultation, "Roles & Structures", "Funding", "Contribution to the wider agenda" and "Professional Issues". This division was followed at the Aviemore consultation. The first workshop, for all four groups, concentrated on "Roles and Structures". Members attending the AGM were asked to indicate their choice of second workshop. Accordingly, there were two workshops on "Funding" and one each on "The Contribution to the wider agenda" and "Professional Issues".

A Board member of SMC, accompanied by a staff member to record the outcomes, chaired each workshop. The Facilitator adopted a roving brief, taking notes and listening to the tone and content of the discussions.

The Facilitator's introduction to the workshops set out the context for the consultation, outlined the Ministers four areas of debate and posed some questions for discussion.

## 3. Outcomes of the consultation workshops

**General:** The consultations were limited to a degree by time and the broad range of issues that required discussion. Most groups touched on the central issues such as roles, structures and funding. Some groups did not reach conclusions, whereas others seemed clearer in their views. These caveats aside, some clear common concerns and views did emerge and indeed some trends in thinking can also be discerned. It remains to be seen if these trends are confirmed by the intensive full-day consultative conference on November 4 and the remaining 2 consultations at Dumfries and Perth.

### 1.Roles and Structures

#### A. The Scottish Office.

While some degree of unease continues with the SE's favoured treatment of the industrial museums, the general view of the SE was that it was a remote body. It was also seen as uninformed about the museum sector and lacking capacity to play a meaningful role. Nevertheless, one group at least voiced their welcome for the Minister's Action Plan initiative.

The Scottish Office was also seen as responsive to stronger sectoral bodies and the example of the SAC was widely mentioned. The larger budget of SAC, as opposed to that of SMC, was also seen as giving it influence.

All groups rejected the apparent reference in Minister Watson's letter to the "practical constraints of existing Funding". It was felt that the Action Plan would

be a “hollow exercise” if new resources were not found. After all, members said, the Audit that prompted the Action Plan had clearly demonstrated the inadequacies and inconsistencies of current museum provision. It was acknowledged that better use of existing resources could potentially improve matters, but there was also a real need for new resources.

#### **B. SMC.**

Two general views were expressed about the role of SMC itself. Its approachability and its detailed knowledge of member's needs were appreciated and valued. Many smaller museums want the membership basis to continue, for that reason. SMC was positively seen as having a clear strategy, a clear structure and as working in partnership with the sector. On the other hand, many others expressed the view that SMC was too poorly funded to have real influence.

There seemed to be an equivalence drawn between getting greater funding from government and SMC becoming a SAC-type organisation. Some members felt that the membership base of SMC was all very well, but may well be worth forgoing in exchange for greater funding and influence. Whether or not these two structures were mutually exclusive, was not discussed. Sectoral relationships (i.e. between government and sponsored bodies) were seen as critical to strengthening an organisation and in that context also, the SAC model was advanced as a model for a re-configured SMC.

All members value SMC highly, increasingly for its advocacy role, which was seen as instrumental in achieving the National Audit. Members however, identified a need to strengthen SMC's role as an advocate and as a development agency. SMC needs to be better resourced to act effectively as an advocate and a development agency.

In summary, everybody greatly valued SMC as a knowledgeable, responsive and approachable body. Many members were comfortable with the status quo and were nervous of change. Increasingly however, the workshops recognised the limitations of SMC's present position. It was seen as insufficiently resourced and weakly situated to effectively achieve its potential as an advocate and development agency.

#### **C. The “nationals”.**

Many members expressed satisfaction with their individual relationships with the NMS, less so with NGS. All, however, acknowledged that personal contacts underpinned these successful individual relationships between national and non-national museums. Thus, access to the knowledge and collections of the national museums and galleries was not available to all museums on a basis of equality of opportunity.

A partnership approach was called for, based on formal agreements, mediated by SMC. If extra funding were to be provided to enable the nationals to deliver a service to other museums, members felt that this would be best managed on their behalf by SMC, which was seen as having a wider view and appreciation of sector needs. Terms like “strategic curatorship” and “genuine partnership” were used to characterise the desired outcomes.

The “nationals” were perceived as having insufficient capacity to deliver an enhanced service to other museums. They were not always seen either as leaders in every field, especially in interpretation and commercial activity,

where independent museums felt they performed better. The core strengths of the “nationals” were seen as collections care and collections management.

#### **D. Local authorities.**

In all groups, much time was spent describing the varying relationships that exist between local authorities and independent museums. It was recognised that local authorities lack the capacity to adequately support the independent museums. The HIMA framework was cited as a successful model of partnership. The historic under-funding of local authorities, in the past 15-18 years especially, was referred to. The cutbacks in core funding were also cited. The central “claw-back” of museum-generated income was seen as a disincentive to perform more efficiently.

Strategic responses to these well-known problems were also discussed. Local authorities needed to respond to the National Audit findings, which identify nationally important collections within their own museums and within independent museums in their regions. Many local authorities do not have strategies in place to guide their relationships with their own or independent museums. SMC, as an advocacy body, has a role in promoting the development of such strategies.

Members valued the requirement that local authorities in Scotland make adequate cultural provision, a position that was seen as better than that obtaining in England, for example. However, it was strongly felt that the “cultural provision” clause needed to be given concrete definition and that it required clarification. “Adequacy” was not defined and need to be so defined.

Local authorities continue to under-fund museums because museums are not core functions. Local authority funding for museums also needs to be protected. SMC was seen as having the potential to assist museums through strategic intervention and advocacy. However, SMC’s situation was seen by some as preventing it exercising sufficient influence to achieve such outcomes. The SAC model was again referred to as stronger in these situations. (It might be helpful to consider whether SAC intervention has in fact protected current arts budgets within local authorities. AW)

## **2. Funding**

Two workshops considered the Minister’s third area for consultation, funding. . Continuing anxiety surfaced regarding the SE “top slicing” of the SCF. The “top sliced” funds were not seen by many members as delivering sustainable outcomes. All participants confirmed the conclusions in other sessions that the Minister’s comment on funding “constraints” could not be accepted.

In support of their views, the following points were made. Sustainable growth could not be achieved without investment. Lifelong Learning cannot be funded on a project-funded basis. Capacity is being wasted chasing project funding, especially for education, which should be regarded as a core function of museums. The Action Plan consultation and the final Plan itself will be “hollow exercises” without increased resources.

The need to increase core funding was seen as the critical issue affecting the future of museums. The scale of resources was seen as inadequate to the tasks required of museums. There were also inconsistencies in distribution of

the available monies, evidenced further by the National Audit. Many museums present at the workshops described themselves in crisis positions.

Members also raised the ethical position of museums that subsist only by paying staff "inhumane" levels of pay.

A number of strategies were discussed which had the potential to address these problems. They all centre on advocacy and development, largely seen as SMC-led processes. The place of Resource was queried. Members felt that its role in Scotland needed to be defined and clarified.

The suggestions for strategic responses included the following: -

SE should give stronger direction to local authorities

HLF could be re-structured to provide revenue funding, via SMC or re-configured museum body of SAC type.

SMC could become a SAC-type body and provide greater funding levels and intervene pro-actively with local authorities.

Local authorities, under a re-defined definition of "adequate cultural provision" could be required to provide core funding for education posts.

If the SCF continues and is increased, it could be divided equally between Projects and Crisis/Core Funding needs.

A link should be developed between funding levels and performance, measured against an agreed standards system.

The SCF was also discussed, in response to the Minister's call for comment. It was generally felt that the current grants need to be evaluated, including those made to the three industrials. The SCF should not be used as a stabilisation fund and must deliver real change.

One practical project proposal also emerged. A test of a sustainable outcome, using the SCF, was proposed- funding an experiment in 2 museums through the removal of entrance fees, conducted as a test case.

### **3. The Contribution to the Wider Agenda**

Time constraints prevented discussion on all the issues. Education and Tourism dominated the workshop. Volunteering and Social Inclusion were barely reached at all. I was present personally for 10 minutes towards the end of the session.

The group re-asserted the central role that museums play in formal and informal education and in lifelong learning. This was contrasted with the small number of education officers in museums and the evidence from the Audit, which showed national museums and the larger local authority museums providing the largest number of education posts. A number of participants noted that 'museums were all about learning' and that learning was not a 'wider agenda'. Practical difficulties in positioning museums within local authority education provision were attributed to poor funding and weak profile of museums within the system. The group considered a number of potential solutions: for example, support for education policy development, working more closely with arts bodies, the production of generic learning resources (recent SCF application from Highland Council was noted), and museums' input to teacher training. However, no clear consensus emerged, except in the area of transport. Here it was agreed that an easily accessible transport fund would address one of the major barriers to museum visits by school and other

community groups. In rural areas particularly this would also help to combat issues of geographic and social exclusion.

The discussion on tourism and museums complimented SMC on its role in developing the tourism framework for action produced by VisitScotland and the Scottish Executive. On the other side of the coin, the absence of a dedicated tourism officer at SMC resulted in an absence of support for museum-tourism initiatives within museums. The economic impact of museums, especially within the tourist industry, is not always recognised. Visitor spend was identified as critical for the independent sector in particular, and independent museums are vulnerable to external tourism trends. In rural areas many museums act as unofficial tourist information centres, but do not receive recognition or support for this function. The point was made that museums were equally important, outwith traditional tourist areas, in improving quality of life for local people.

Whereas the group made few strategic recommendations, the absence of co-ordination and central guidance can be reasonably inferred as issues that needed to be addressed, by SMC or by a partnership between SMC and other bodies.

#### **4. Professional Issues**

A useful discussion aired a wide range of concerns, leading to suggested strategic responses. Lack of knowledge amongst trustees and board members and lack of capacity amongst curators were agreed as significant problems. The backlog in documentation, as evidenced by the National Audit, was defined as a barrier to the exploitation of ICT. Museum Registration was agreed to be inflexible and inadequate in assessing performance.

The following strategic responses were agreed as desirable.

- A National Training strategy is needed that includes an assessment of governance needs.
- A National Audit of Skills was suggested, to increase capacity of curators and managers.
- A National Documentation Strategy was called for which would permit easy public interaction and embrace the principle of Full Disclosure.
- A recognition that ICT capacity was unevenly developed across the sector and the need to define a basic bottom line of adequacy for ICT provision.
- The formulation of a framework of guidance to the rapidly changing ICT sector was also called for.
- SCRAN should give licences out free-of-charge.
- A mechanism for modernising collecting was discussed, which I understood to mean guidance on forming contemporary collections?
- A system of standards was called for, possibly modular in form. The National Audit standards framework has potential here but the workshop did not advance any specific standards system while I was present.

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