



Scottish Museums Council Response to the Museum Association's 'Collections for the Future' Consultation

i) The Scottish Museums Council

The Scottish Museums Council (SMC) is the representative body and membership organisation for Scotland's non-national museums and galleries. The Scottish Executive acknowledges SMC as its main advisor on local museums and as the main channel of Executive support for the sector. Our aim is to improve museum and gallery provision in Scotland for both local people and visitors. We have over 200 members who in turn manage over 330 museums. They include 32 local authorities, universities, regimental and independent museums, ranging in size from small voluntary trusts to large metropolitan services, and together attracting in excess of one million visitors a year.

SMC combines strategic leadership for the sector with provision of professional information, advisory and support services to members. Whilst we provide an important integrated service to museums, our long-term aim is to establish a culture of capacity rather than dependency. We therefore place considerable emphasis on helping museums to help themselves.

SMC's vision is modern and accessible museums and galleries that use their collections to:

- Inspire People
- Shape Identity
- Improve Understanding
- Provide Enjoyment
- Promote Confidence

ii) Introduction

SMC welcomes the Museum Association's consultation document, *Collections for the Future*. The capacity to develop, care for and manage collections is fundamental to museums as the basis of the other services they provide and their legacy to future generations.

Political priorities in recent years have encouraged museums to focus resources and attention on learning provision and has tended to be to the detriment of collections and stewardship. This consultation is particularly timely then, in providing opportunity for broad discussion about our museum collections, their status and future direction - and in promoting to the wider sector the value of collections in their own right.

The ongoing Cultural Review taking place in Scotland has highlighted the need to recognise individual rights and entitlements to museums and heritage, and through bodies such as the recently formed Scottish Museums Partnership, this will undoubtedly influence future developments within the sector. The safeguarding of Scotland's significant collections for present and future generations had however already been identified as one of SMC's ten priorities for a new parliament, and discussed in the advocacy document *The Future of the Past*.

SMC has been vocal in its promotion of the value of collections and collecting to communities, and has built on the work of the *National Audit of Scotland's Museums & Galleries*, undertaken in 2001. In our response to the Scottish Executive's call for suggestions for *An Action Framework for Museums*, SMC set out a number of initiatives. We have drawn mainly on this work in formulating our response and on the responses of delegates at a recent meeting to discuss these proposals.

In September 2004, the Scottish Museum Council and the Scottish Museums Federation organised a joint consultation on collections and more than 50 delegates representing independent, local authority, national and university museums and galleries from across Scotland attended. The high turnout would seem indicative of the levels of concern felt over the stewardship, structure and sustainability of museum collections in Scotland. We are grateful to participants for permitting their views to be recorded and used to inform SMC's response.

SMC has consistently provided support for collections activity through our grants programme, and one of the three key themes identified for Strategic Change Fund (SCF) projects was to increase access to collections. This focus has resulted in a number of projects that are already demonstrating developments like those that the MA is consulting on, such as strategic networking and functional partnerships focused around collections.

Response to the MA's questions in Collections For The Future

A) Is the MA right in thinking that radical change is needed if we are to realise the potential of our museum collections?

SMC does not concede that radical change is required so much as *radical development* of many existing structures, plans and ambitions. A good deal of what is proposed in this document is already happening in UK museums.

We hope that the momentum for evaluation and reappraisal suggested with this consultation will crystallise into a more strategic, coherent and formalised approach to museum collections; but equally we recognise the long standing dedication and creativity of museum staff, often in spite of poor resources or support, which have brought us to this point. SMC hopes that the sense of optimism brought about by this consultation will not result in falsely raised expectations. The issues, in our view, have less to do with mechanisms than in appropriately channelling investment.

1) Collaboration

1.1) Do you agree that it would be helpful to establish a framework of subject networks?

There is widespread agreement that promoting effective partnerships should be a key principle of any sectoral development and SMC recognises the immense value of networks, forums and partnerships between museums throughout Scotland, the UK and internationally. These are instrumental in supporting staff and ensuring the care and development of the distributed national collection. SMC does much to support networking and functional partnership, for example, through SCF projects, RDCF and regional forums. We would welcome wider sector support for and recognition of such initiatives.

The scope for further collaboration between subject specialists, national and non-national museums, and also with cross-sectoral organisations is to be encouraged. However SMC's experience is that there needs to be a degree of flexibility and fluidity in these arrangements to ensure they maximise creativity and the opportunity to be re-vitalised.

We suggest that the initial focus of any formal, developmental framework ought to be on existing networks. Museum professionals already participate voluntarily with a wide variety of collaborative networks by, for example:

- Contributing to the work of UK wide subject-specialist groups such as the Social History Curators' Group, Science & Industry Collections Group and the Museum Ethnographers' Group
- Acting as Curatorial Advisers for independent museums under MLA's Accreditation (formerly Registration) Scheme
- Contributing to Regional Museum Forums and Federations

SMC recognises the degree to which voluntary schemes make an essential contribution. Many are long-established and can draw from amongst their members a wealth of knowledge in the form of local authority curators, academics and volunteers. But lack of formal recognition and under-resourcing means such networks are currently stretched beyond their limits and cannot provide the levels of support now required.

The opportunities for joint collaboration between national and non-national museums and galleries in subject specialist areas must be taken and enhanced, though clarity of roles and responsibilities and parity of esteem within a national or operational framework are critical if partnerships are to be meaningful. This is true not only for national advice and support programmes but in the wider context it is essential for the long-term sustainability and development of the sector.

SMC is aware that staff in the nationals already contribute much valued assistance, often without corporate recognition, and suggests there needs to be established mechanisms for corporate engagement.

1.2) If so, what areas would be the priorities for them to address?

The priority for subject specialist networks must be to maximise the flow of knowledge from those with expertise to those that need it. This requires specialist groups to be more inclusive than at present, and for there to be mechanisms in place that build confidence and enable participation at all levels. SMC suggests that networks could assist in achieving this, by creating opportunities for parties to contribute more through functional partnerships on projects. An example is the SCF funded *Scottish Textile Heritage Online* project led by Heriot Watt University. This enabled six partner museums and archives to promote the nation's rich textiles heritage by surveying, cataloguing and providing an on-line searchable database of their collections.

1.3) What subject areas should be the priority for pilots, if funding could be secured?

In Scotland SCF programmes have acted as pilots, and the forthcoming evaluation of the scheme will hopefully inform future similar projects. In SMC's view, it would not be helpful to suggest priority subject areas, since our experience is that the incentive needs to come from within the museums community.

It is important to maximise opportunities for publicity by linking with wider tourism initiatives, such as the Highland 2007 celebrations of highland culture, and the planned celebration for Burns Heritage in 2009.

1.4) What should be the balance between centrally-determined priorities and museums' own priorities? How much autonomy should individual museums retain?

There needs to be a balance between strategic development and response to local needs. SMC celebrates the diversity of our member museums. Many reflect their local community and its identity, and play an active role in the economic and social life of their region. There are however, various national initiatives, political and social agendas with which museums want to engage and do so, under the auspices of SMC.

1.5) What kind of information resources do we need to support collaborative working?

In SMC's experience, a range of mechanisms is needed, but the best way forward is towards web-based information.

Just producing information is not enough however, and indeed there is a danger of there simply being too much information. Our experience is that there needs to be assistance in selection and decision-making; the process of turning information into action needs facilitation to inspire confidence, encourage participation and ensure quality.

A number of mechanisms were suggested at the recent consultation as useful in development of collaborative working, and many already enjoy access to a variety i.e. one to one meetings, forums, email discussion groups. The email network, the Preventative Conservation Forum is one of several existing sources of advice and contact. It was established by SMC and has grown into

a popular and useful tool.

On-line directories of useful contacts, potential collaborators and sources of collections-related information in the form of a centrally maintained 'national database' has been suggested as a useful resource. This might be something that subject networks could work up, perhaps by first providing accurate and complete information about existing collections and collecting practice, and facilitated by MLA or SMC.

1.6) What should be the strategic focus of a programme of documentation?

SMC agrees that there needs to be a strategic focus for documentation and for tackling backlogs. A *National ICT Strategy for Scotland's Museums* highlighted the fact that museums need straightforward ways of managing their collections electronically. Whilst many museums are preoccupied with trying to replicate their object-level databases online (which is simply not possible in many cases), we believe that collection-level descriptions may offer an alternative and more accessible approach to making knowledge about collections available to the widest possible audience.

Under the strategy, SMC is currently organising a pilot project to explore the potential of collection-level descriptions in museums, and has received encouraging indication that broader use and advice on standards would be welcomed. As means of providing 'top-level' collection descriptions for knowledge sharing both internally and externally, to increase collection profiles on the Internet, and as means of complying with the new Accreditation Scheme requirement that collections are fully inventoried, their potential usefulness is manifold.

SMC has made an open commitment to the Full Disclosure initiative in Scotland. This will provide a strategic approach to retrospective documentation, and will encourage cross-domain working between museums, libraries and archives with the common aim of eliminating documentation backlogs.

We aim to take these ideas forward in the future through production of a Stewardship Strategy for Scotland's museums.

1.7) Do you agree that there is a serious expertise deficit in museums? How should this be addressed? How can museums share expertise more effectively?

Assuming expertise is in the area of collections, SMC agrees only in part that there is a deficit. There is, however, a climate in which expertise is being repressed and time diverted into other activities, which causes much frustration.

In *From National Audit to National Framework: SMC's response to the Scottish Executive Action Plan Consultation*, we suggest that the Scottish Executive, SMC and museum employers need to ensure an effective Sector Skills Council (SSC) for cultural heritage in Scotland. Training and skills

development needs to take account of the volunteer workforce, and offer equal opportunities to paid and unpaid staff.

Strategic, 'collection-less' curators whose role would be to research, collate and disseminate knowledge of distributed, specialist collections rather than manage them physically could be employed. A programme of shared curatorial internships or posts, involving the nationals, would also be an efficient and effective way of improving capacity, of bringing in new blood, and developing curatorial and management skills.

Recognising existing expertise and introducing more effective mechanisms to retain the knowledge, extracting it from retiring individuals before they leave, should be developed. An on-line directory, listing specialists and how to contact them might be developed or groups of freelancers established specifically to share skills on a regional basis.

1.8) Do people who work in museums need different kinds of expertise? How can these be developed?

Yes, undoubtedly museums need a broad range of skills across the workforce, of which collections expertise is just one. These skills may be corporate or individual, but there is a real need for a Workforce Development Strategy and initiatives such as the Leadership Development Programme which SMC is funding under the SCF.

The sheer variety of skills required by museum staff naturally makes it increasingly important to look externally for opportunity and experience. Sharing skills programmes, secondments at other heritage organisations or outwith the sector are increasing popular as staff need become ever more effective in fundraising, project management, marketing etc.

1.9) How can museums ensure that they have better access to external expertise?

Consultants can be very helpful in bringing external expertise in a range of disciplines into museums. Collections expertise can exist in academic institutions as well as with individuals in the community. Museums must be energised to foster relationships that tap into this wider expertise, and its value needs to be formally recognised.

In the wider sense, museums need programmes such as the Arts and Business Development programme that SMC is funding in the Highlands, to help museums develop business skills – in this instance, at board level.

2) Clarifying the Use of Museum Collections

2.1) Do you agree that it would be helpful to have a nationally recognised network of reference collections, linked to the subject networks, which all museums could draw on?

SMC is cautious about the matter of national recognition, since all collections have the potential to be used for reference. The fact that some are more utilised than others is an indication of under-investment in research and research facilities, a fact well exemplified by *Scotland's National Audit*

Standards.

SMC considers there needs to be a mix of initiatives that make progress on several fronts; this being just one. Others might include digitised resources which could be updated regularly and utilised to provide access to the best collections with far less risk of damage through handling, etc

2.2) Do you agree that museums should make it a higher priority to transfer underused parts of their collections to other owners?

SMC does not consider this to be a top priority, but further discussion should be had as to whether and how this might become a reality in the longer term.

Certainly few museums consider it a priority or would be able to do this now, since it is not particularly easy identifying other potential owners or negotiating the process of disposal. *Why* collections are underused might be a more interesting question, and what can or should be done to address this. Is it because some are simply currently unfashionable? Physically inaccessible due to inadequate storage or display? Difficult to interpret through lack of collections knowledge or sufficient documentation? Is the problem a temporary one, or are the collections it preserves a permanent and unrewarding drain on resources?

2.3) Do you agree that the benefits of initiatives such as open storage and digitisation have yet to be proven? Are there any other innovative ways of using collections that should be considered in the final report?

SMC agrees that the benefits of open storage and digitisation have yet to be proven. There is a danger that both can be seen as simple solutions to complex problems. The issue, especially for digitisation, is striking the balance between quantity and quality. SMC is examining this and believes that significantly more research is needed to demonstrate the real public benefits of digitisation. One initiative under the ICT Strategy will be to undertake impact assessment of some of these projects.

3) More ambitious and better targeted collecting

3.1) Do you believe that there would be merit in developing more systematic programmes for recording contemporary life? There are international models we could adapt, most famously SAMDOK in Sweden. But will this kind of collection really excite future museum users?

There is a need to establish better practice for contemporary collecting but it would be most helpful to first decide strategy and policy in this area, and then to develop programmes to fit.

For too long the sector has avoided the issue of national and regional collecting policies. At the recent consultation, delegates expressed various view on the subject. Enhanced documentation would clearly assist in assessing what we already have and agreeing the parameters for what we collect, both now and in the future. Linked to this is the need to engage on the subject of rationalisation.

Whilst many organisations want to consider the rationalisation or redistribution of some parts of their collection, their ability to do so is obstructed by mechanisms of disposal, combined with community pressures to retain formal ownership. There is also growing support for the need to target resources towards the most important collections.

3.2) How can museums get better at recording contextual information associated with objects?

A good start would be to make it very easy to capture information at source, and then ensure mechanisms are in place so it is easy to add to later. This calls for entirely electronic knowledge management by museums, and investment in the infrastructure and skills that would enable it. The museum sector needs to look at how others achieve this, such as libraries, archives and universities for example.

3.3) Is the idea of a holding collection helpful? What conditions would be necessary to ensure that donors' trust was not undermined?

SMC regards the idea of holding collections helpful, but unrealistic at present. This is an ideal, as is more adventurous collecting practice, but which currently would be more likely to create an extra layer of bureaucracy and introduce possible confusion over objects' status.

For the less strategic, holding collections could offer the opportunity to delay many potentially difficult decisions and add to the backlog of unaccessioned objects. For those with a planned approach to collecting, they are simply unnecessary; the museum should already have the mechanism to dispose if required.

It seems unlikely that many donors would distinguish between permanent and temporarily held donations and difficult to see how trust would not be undermined.

3.4) Who should decide what museums should collect? Are we right to suggest that boards and governing bodies should take a more strategic role?

Curators working with their colleagues and with an awareness of the collecting practice of their neighbouring museums, ought be given responsibility for what is or is not collected. However, governing bodies should, in an ideal world, be involved in setting strategy and overseeing policy. These need to be robust and sufficiently detailed to focus collecting activity appropriately.

The difficulty at present is that there is real fear, especially in museums governed within much larger and multi-faceted institutions, that more involvement would be detrimental. The result is that the necessary debates about the future of collecting and about more joined-up collecting etc, cannot take place. This is a real issue for the non-national museums sector.

4) Beyond the museum

4.1) Do museums have a role to play in preserving material culture outside museums?

Museums do have a role to play in preserving material culture outside of museums and many do, working with local groups, enthusiasts and societies. Mutually beneficial relationships are developed and knowledge shared. SMC encourages this, as exemplified in the success of the recent Strategic Change Fund project which set out to map Burns collections in private ownership as well as in museums.

Such work needs to be more formally recognised and celebrated as a public service, but equally museums should take their responsibilities in this area much more seriously. There is a tendency for relationships outside of the museum to be built individually and not mainstreamed into corporate practice.

4.2) How can museums work more productively with collections held by private owners?

Museums have long worked productively with private owners, making the museum available as an exhibition venue, assisting with research and providing collections care or associated information.

Art galleries have been in the vanguard in productive working with private owners. The essential ingredient is the investment of time needed to develop relationships of trust, and the underlying issue is one of investment in subject specialists and in the networking skills necessary to make and maintain such alliances.

4.3) Do you agree that museums should consider transferring objects to owners in the sector if this increases public access and improves their care? In what circumstances might this be an option?

In principle SMC thinks more consideration should be given to transferring objects, but museums would be very cautious about this at the present time. Aside from the ethical obligation owed to the donor, there could potentially be legal difficulties, i.e. charities not able to give items to non-charitable bodies and current public funding arrangements acting as a deterrent. The subject needs significantly more research and testing.

The circumstances in which it might be appropriate are where there is a clear-cut rationale for the transfer (i.e. an item being returned to its place of origin) coupled with clear public benefits. Even so, the likelihood is that the institution making the transfer would have a continuing responsibility if the receiver were not a public institution.