

Scottish Museums Council response to the Cultural Heritage Consortium's "Priorities for Full Disclosure: consultation paper"

The Scottish Museums Council (SMC) is the principal avenue for Scottish government support to, and the membership organisation, for Scotland's 340 non-national museums and galleries. SMC combines strategic leadership for the sector, developing national policies and initiatives with the distribution of grants, practical advice and services for members.

The Council's mission is to achieve the best possible museum and gallery provision in Scotland for the public benefit.

Strategic Objectives

- i. Promote recognition of the essential role played by museums in the life of Scotland.
- ii. Promote the role of museums in contributing to the learning society.
- iii. Make museums more socially inclusive and accessible.
- iv. Develop a national strategy for a sustainable museums network in Scotland and ensure this is implemented.
- v. Enable museums to develop their potential by promoting good management, high professional standards and the effective use of resources.
- vi. Always operate effectively and efficiently and provide value for money in our activities.

SMC welcomes the opportunity to support a cross-domain initiative focussing on the retrospective conversion of catalogue and documentation data to electronic formats, and the retrospective cataloguing or documentation of non-current acquisitions.

The initial findings of the National Audit of Scottish museums indicated that only 27% of museums have up-to-date documentation records, while 17% have more than 10,000 items awaiting cataloguing. The table below gives reasons for the backlog.

Table 1: Measures organisations consider they need to reduce documentation backlog (though NB not all organisations have a backlog)

Measures needed	Number of orgs
Additional staff member(s)	65
More time dedicated to documentation	35
Computerised documentation systems	21
Training in documentation	5
Other	2
Total	128

It is in the best interest of the museums sector for collections to be as fully documented as possible, so clearly, there is plenty of scope for the Full Disclosure project.

We agree that there needs to be both Threshold Criteria, which set a basic level that activities should meet in order to attract funding, and Selection Criteria, which prioritises the order in which projects should be dealt with.

Threshold Criteria

1. Standards and interoperability

Electronic catalogues and databases must meet agreed bibliographic standards, and also be interoperable. This is becoming more important as seamless access to the holdings of organisations becomes an expectation rather than an aspiration.

2. Accessibility

As the public are encouraged to foster a sense of ownership about their local museums and heritage, museums must respond by making access easier. Ensuring a collection is fully documented facilitates this access. It also allows for greater co-operation between museums, eg in terms of joint exhibitions, collection policies.

3. Sustainability

This criterion does present difficulties, as organisations do not always have control over the sustainability of a project, eg if funding priorities change. However, it is important that there is at least an intention of sustainability.

4. Funding

There has until very recently been a funding disadvantage in Scotland. In 1999 DCMS made available, through Resource, £500,000 to be spent on IT projects in museums. This funding was available for a 2 year period, which is now at an end. However, this money was only available for museums in England.

The Scottish Executive has now made £800,000 available for ICT and education projects in Scotland. This money is to be divided over a 3 year period, £50,000 for the first year, £250,000 for the second and £500,000 for the third. This money would not make a difference where the key to the documentation backlog is not ICT related, eg a lack of trained staff. Also, it is not solely for use regarding documentation, and so documentation needs to compete with other ICT projects and education projects. Clearly there is a need for funding to enable museums to cope with the backlog mentioned earlier. Documenting museums objects is often very time-consuming, because objects usually need to be researched to obtain the information required to document them effectively. This is not a problem usually faced by libraries and archives. Any possible funding would need to take into account the need for research, as well as more staff and IT equipment.

Selection Criteria

1. Contextual

The need to promote access to information, lifelong learning and social inclusion are all issues which can help to highlight priorities for retrospective cataloguing / documentation.

In addition, sectoral standards should also guide selection. In the museums sector, the registration scheme has eight requirements regarding documentation. These are

- Entry and exit records
- Location/movement recording
- Accession records
- Security copy of accession records

- Marking and labelling
- Information retrieval
- Loan records
- Retrospective documentation plan

These requirements are explained fully in the document "Registration Guidelines" produced by the Museums and Galleries Commission. Of these eight requirements, accession records and information retrieval are the key tasks regarding retrospective documentation. The other requirements are more easily achieved once there is a system for accessioning items and being able to retrieve items in place.

A fully documented collection impacts greatly on other areas of museum stewardship. Long term care of collections, conservation and prioritising care are all easier when museums staff know what objects they have.

2. Significance

As part of the National Audit, museums in Scotland were invited to assess and record the significance of parts of their collections. The Significance Panel, a panel composed of independent experts, will assess and validate the claims of significance. At this stage, results from the collections data are still provisional. The Significance Panel and the project team will focus on this area over the next three months to provide full analysis at the final report stage. However, the picture already emerging is of a rich cultural heritage of national and international significance dispersed throughout Scotland and cared for by all museum types - national, local authority, university, regimental and independent.

- The majority of organisations responding (79%) have claimed that some or all of their museum collections are of UK-wide, national or international significance.
- Of the 128 independent museums, returned so far, 96 (or 75%) stated that some or all of their collections are of national, UK-wide or international significance.
- Of the 29 local authorities, returned so far, 28 stated that some or all of their collections are of national, UK-wide or international significance.
- Of the 9 industrial museums, all stated that some or all of their collections are of national, UK-wide or international significance.
- Of the 7 regimental museums, all stated that some or all of their collections are of national, UK-wide or international significance.
- Of the 10 university organisations, all stated that some or all of their collections are of national, UK-wide or international significance.

3. Users, non-users and use

Retrospective cataloguing cannot help but impact upon the work of museums.

Having a record of items in a collection can only

- a. benefit users by making more items available. Users in this context can be both museums staff and the general public. As with libraries, both types of user have different access requirements. The benefits for museums staff alone from documented collections make retrospective documentation worth while.
- b. benefit non-users by possibly bringing to light artefacts of interest which may draw in new visitors
- c. and increase use by giving museum staff a clearer picture of the artefacts available to them in the collection

4. Risk

The risks mentioned in the consultation paper all apply to museum objects. Documenting a collection gives museum staff leverage in terms of highlighting possible risks posed to objects.

5. Access

Many museums do already have a culture of collaboration, eg by making use of or putting together touring exhibitions. Obviously, some types of access would have significant resource implications, eg transporting of valuable artefacts from one museum to another, housing of the object once it reaches its destination. The costs are high when compared to the relatively low cost of an inter-library loan scheme.

6. Collaboration

The National Audit is really the first attempt to give a Scotland-wide picture of documentation, amongst other issues. Although large backlogs have been identified, the process has been positive in that it has given SMC the factual evidence to back up the view that many museums weren't up-to-date with their documentation. This information now paves the way for priorities to be set.

7. Value for money

One of the potential uses of the National Audit will be as a planning tool for museums. It will allow museums to build on strengths and identify areas for improvement. SMC has argued that the Audit should be updated to allow museums to monitor performance and trends over time. In this way Scottish museums would have an effective tool for benchmarking.

Conclusion

This response has referred extensively to the National Audit which, to some degree, can inform the Full Disclosure programme in Scotland. A copy of the Interim Report is attached for information. The final report will be available in May 2002.

17th December 2001