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front cover and opposite  
The Highland Museum of Childhood,  
Strathpeffer



This document, which is part of the Scottish Museums Council’s *Museum Issues* series, is a summarised version of the report *Assessment of Independent Highland Museums* which was compiled by independent consultants for SMC, the Highland Council and Highlands and Islands Enterprise during 1999.

The Highlands Museum Forum also made a significant contribution to the whole process, providing information, direction and practical advice. This summarised version presents the original study’s main findings in a manner which, it is hoped, will appeal to a wide audience.

Setting the Scene

In the past, the pattern of museum provision in the Highlands was such that the vast majority of museums were provided by small community-based independent organisations, with two large regional museums provided by the Local Authority.

However, during 1996, prior to the local government reorganisation, the then Highland Regional Council began to look at the funding structure of museums in the Highlands. When the eight existing District Councils and Highland Regional Council were amalgamated in to one large council, the Highland Council, it became apparent that there had been considerable disparities in the museums funding policy. As a result, some museums were relatively well-funded, while other museums received little or no funding at all. There was little standardisation of policy and ranges of funding mechanisms were in place.

The challenge to the new Highland Council was to rectify the situation and attempt to introduce a process that would meet the needs of individual Highland museums. In order to take this idea forward, a Steering Group made up of representatives from the Scottish Museums Council, Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Highlands Museum Forum was formed during 1999.

One of the primary tasks of the Steering Group was to commission a study to look at the current needs and roles of independent museums in the Highlands. During the Spring of 1999, Independent Northern Consultants were asked to build up a clear picture of how each museum was run, funded and structured. An Economic Impact Study was also produced. As a means of measuring quality, Registered and Provisionally Registered museums and SMC members were included in the study.

The main objective of the study was to help guide future provision in the museums sector through analysis of current provision of independent museum services in the Highland Council area. In addition, there was the need to gain an understanding of the needs of these museums and the different roles that independent museums can play as cultural, heritage, educational and tourism facilities.

The study’s ultimate aim was to allow all those involved with museums in the Highlands to work together in planning their future. This was based on the establishment of a commonly agreed strategic process which would enable funders, museums and other social and cultural groups to work together to further the heritage sector in the Highlands.

The Consultative Process

Provision and role of Highland Independent Museums

The study recognised that Highland museums provide a valuable asset to the local community in which they are situated, offering a focus for local pride and an opportunity to develop individual skills through direct involvement and education. They also provide wider benefits to the economy by offering tourism opportunities.

Central to the initial study’s assessment was an audit of 23 independent museums, complemented by discussions with representatives from funders of museums in the Highland Council area and other relevant organisations. At the time of the study, of these 23 independent museums, 14 were Registered under the then Museums & Galleries Commission Scheme, 7 were Provisionally Registered and 2 were SMC associate members. The Highland Council’s directly operated museums in Kingussie and Inverness were not included in the audit. To ensure accuracy, every museum involved had the opportunity to confirm the results of the study. The museums listed on the next page were involved.



opposite  
Tarbat Discovery Centre

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- 02
- Registered:**

  - *Museum of the Isles and Clan Donald Centre, Armadale*
  - *Clan Macpherson Museum, Newtonmore*
  - *Cromarty Courthouse Museum*
  - *Dingwall Museum*
  - *Gairloch Heritage Museum*
  - *Glencoe and North Lorn Folk Museum*
  - *Groam House Museum, Rosemarkie*
  - *Highland Museum of Childhood, Strathpeffer*
  - *Nairn Museum*
  - *Strathnaver Museum, Bettyhill*
  - *Tain Through Time*
  - *Timespan Heritage Centre, Helmsdale*
  - *Ullapool Museum and Visitor Centre*
  - *West Highland Museum, Fort William*

- Provisionally Registered:**
- *Clan Gunn Heritage Centre and Museum, Latheron*
  - *Glenfinnan Railway Station Museum*
  - *Grantown Museum*
  - *Laidhay Croft Museum, Dunbeath*
  - *Mallaig Heritage Centre*
  - *Hugh Miller's Cottage, Cromarty*
  - *Nairn Fishertown Museum*

- SMC Associate Members:**
- *Tarbat Discovery Centre, Portmahomack*
  - *Dornoch Historylinks*

Following the initial assessment, the study focused on community-run museums.

- Results**

The study revealed a wealth of information relating to the function of the independent museums sector in the Highlands. Some of the consultant's key findings and suggestions for future action are:
- Overall level of service is, on the whole, good and museums meet their objectives very well.
  - Museums manage their budgets well although they are vulnerable to economic changes.
  - Medium-term development plans are often quite ambitious, but museums should look at ways to improve their financial stability.
  - Museums generally own their own premises or pay modest rents.
  - Museums should focus clearly on their own area of interest and displays should be of a high standard.
  - Museums are dependent on tourism to generate income. They should invest in visitor facilities and marketing to increase their market share.
  - Potential exists for museums to bring mutual benefits both to themselves and other local businesses. Joint ventures should be investigated.
  - Community involvement is a strong feature of many Highland independent museums but there is often an over-dependency on volunteers.
  - There is great scope to work collaboratively. Joint projects should be encouraged.
  - Training needs are numerous and wide-ranging.

- Recommendations to Funders**

The study suggests the adoption of a set of shared strategic principles that would help both the funders and the independent museums to move forward in partnership and union. Much of the potential success of these principles rests with the idea of reciprocity.
- Strategic Principles**

**Reciprocity:**  
The Highland Council and other funders, traditionally recognised as grant giving organisations to the museums sector, would apply criteria that the museums could and should meet, but the museums would also know what they are entitled to in return from these agencies.

- Revenue funding support:**  
On the whole, museums should receive higher levels of funding than they currently receive and there should be a more equal distribution of funding than currently exists. However, reliance on block grant or deficit funding is quite undesirable and funding should relate to particular responsibilities and services. Museums should be encouraged to develop in ways that help them to reduce their requirement for annual revenue funding.
- Professionalism:**  
Increased attention should be given to training staff and volunteers in all aspects of museum work.

- Market research:**  
Both new development and annual operation should be based more firmly on market research.
- Staff remuneration:**  
Museum staff should be paid the going rate for the job.
- In order to ensure that the principle of reciprocity is allowed to develop and to ensure that funding is used to maximise social and economic returns, the study recommended that three fundamental, linked ideas be adopted. These are:

- *The Funding Formula*
- *Baseline Level of Museum Provision*
- *Service Agreements*

In order to succeed, these three ideas would have to work together as a package. A much more mutual approach would be established where the relationship between the Highland Council and independent museums would be equal.

- Funding Formula**

The study suggests that a formula be devised which would be applied to all community-run independent museums in the Highlands to help determine baseline levels of funding with supplements relating to performance and standards. The funding formula sets down the baseline level of provision necessary to receive funding from the Highland Council, implemented through the use of service agreements.

Several options for future revenue funding of independent museums by Highland Council were suggested. The most appropriate approach was to establish a formula with criteria from which funding entitlement of independent museums could be assessed. This would provide the following benefits:
- it would allow medium to long-term stability and allow improved forward planning and would represent a more responsible attitude towards museum collections
  - it would be easier to measure spending
  - a model for future projects would be introduced
  - it would help towards the establishment of manageable service agreements
  - a museum's contribution towards meeting funder's aims would be recognised and rewarded
  - a clear relationship would be established between the Highland Council Heritage Officers and the independent sector
  - 'case histories' would be established.

- Baseline Levels of Museum Provision**

The study recommends that the most useful and relevant benchmark, at the present time, would be defined as full Museums & Galleries Commission (now Resource) Registration and to attain at least 2 stars through the Scottish Tourist Board Visitor Attraction Grading Scheme.

Any funding would allow museums to provide minimum levels of service (baseline level of funding) and, in order to increase their funding, they could provide more specialist services for which they would receive additional funding (supplementary revenue subsidy) from the Highland Council.

The baseline level of funding would be set at a level that would cover the following:
- curatorial assistance from a professionally qualified person on a salary recognised by the museum profession
  - basic collections care management and documentation
  - appropriate interpretation of collections and story lines
  - the costs of maintaining adequate conditions within the museum building.



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Tarbat Discovery Centre  
  
opposite  
Gairloch Heritage Museum

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04 In addition, supplementary revenue subsidy should then reflect some or all of the following:

- having a wider remit for research
- responsibility for maintaining important collections
- delivering a specific outreach or educational programme
- delivering professional assistance to other independent museums
- the degree of voluntary time committed
- skills development and training
- holding temporary exhibitions of a high standard
- ultimately attaining 4 or 5 stars through the Scottish Tourist Board grading scheme.

To aid the museum’s cash flow, the revenue subsidy would be paid in two stages:

- an initial payment at the beginning of the year, providing a basic amount plus a sum related to targets already achieved plus (or minus) an adjustment related to actual achievements in the previous year
- a second payment, reflecting achievements during the year plus (or minus) an adjustment to the basic payment that was made at the beginning of the year to reflect actual, as opposed to projected, operation.

Core funding would only be available to genuine community-based museums that clearly do not have sufficient private funding available to cover core activities.

**Service Agreements**

Service Agreements act as a two-way mechanism, almost like a contract, for regulating the partnership between the Highland Council and the network of independent museums. In exchange for the long-term security of an agreed formula for determining annual revenue subsidy, the independent museums would be playing their part in assisting Highland Council in delivering Best Value (as defined by SMC) and the requirement to ‘follow the public pound’ through its Museums Service by agreeing to operate at (or above) a baseline level of museum provision.

In order to succeed, a support structure would have to be in place. Ideally this would be one from which both Highland Council and the independent museums benefited. This structure would encourage contact between a local representative from the independent museums sector and a museum professional employed by the Council. A two-way flow and dissemination of information, policy and training would be encouraged. A means of monitoring the process would also be provided through the use of Service Agreements. An integral part of the Service Agreement with each museum is an individually negotiated set of targets, which provide the Local Authority and museum with a way of measuring progress.

Service Agreements should be reciprocal and should include details of what the Highland Council is to provide in exchange for the delivery of stated outcomes. They would also be the means of actually ensuring the implementation of the funding formula and baseline level of provision.

**Benefits**

Many benefits would be introduced, to both funders and museums, if the suggested support and funding approach were to be implemented.

**To funders**

- to provide better value for money
- to ensure that funding is more focused and better directed
- to encourage equity, quality and partnership
- to have an equalisation of funding approach across the geographic area
- to set achievable targets.

**To museums**

- to assist longer-term/future planning
- to improve quality
- to help underpin voluntary effort
- to recognise the important role of museums to both local people and visitors
- to have achievable targets
- everyone gets the same basic level of funding
- introduction of real partnership
- strengthening of roles and more control.

**Economic Impact Study**

In addition to the actual role of museums in the Highlands, an Economic Impact Study (EIS) was undertaken which reinforces the important role independent museums play in the economy of the Highlands. The results of the EIS include the following:

- Along with the many volunteers involved in running Highland independent museums, there are the equivalent of 28 full-time employees.
- As part of the overall visitor experience of the Highlands, 133,750 bed nights are added annually, something which would not happen if the independent museums did not exist.
- A total of £5.06 million is added to the Highland economy.
- Although Highland independent museums do make a considerable contribution to the Highland economy, it could be enhanced in the following ways:

**Highland Level**

- by higher profile marketing
- by stronger promotion of the Highlands as a cultural and family history resource
- by increasing the number of relatively high profile and/or popular temporary exhibitions, especially sharing between museums
- by strengthening retailing within museums of products not duplicated in other retail outlets.

**Local Community Level**

- by improved marketing, based on market research
- by further development of joint marketing initiatives
- by increased provision of genealogical and other products
- by increased appeal to the family market
- by advertising within the museum of overnight stay facilities
- by the creation of projects where students and other visitors can work alongside museums staff and volunteers.

**Conclusion**

The recommendations from the study are radical and far-reaching, showing a move away from the traditional means of supporting independent museums in the Highland Council area. Block-grant funding, a quite undesirable means of support, will be replaced by a funding formula which, in turn, will provide a baseline level of provision, administered and monitored through the use of service agreements. This fresh approach to supporting independent museums shows a significant change in direction, with the emphasis based firmly on the principle of reciprocity.

The recommended way forward for both funders and Highland independent museums is through the implementation of these new approaches. To ensure success in the long-term there must be commitment from all parties. Although there is an understanding that such a significant change in direction is a positive step, it is also recognised that such a major change in thinking for Highland-wide policy will take time to bed in and become the ‘norm’.

There is little doubt that those involved in the process are committed to it becoming a reality. However, the Highland Council are unfortunately unable to move forward with the idea as quickly as anticipated due to their funding constraints. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the recommendations from the study will be successfully implemented in the near future.