

MUSEUMS
ASSOCIATION



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Museums
Galleries
Scotland

Public perceptions of - and attitudes to - the purposes of museums in society

A report prepared by BritainThinks for Museums Association

March 2013

Table of contents

1. Executive summary	P3
2. Objectives	P7
3. Methodology	P8
4. Background perceptions	P10
5. The purposes of museums	P12
5.1. Spontaneous attitudes	P12
5.2. Post-stimulus attitudes	P14
5.3. Reinterpreted hierarchy of purposes	P22
6. Conclusions	P26
7. Implications for Museums 2020	P28
Appendix	
Agenda	
Purposes boards	
Selected Obituaries	
Selected initial collages	
Selected final collages	
Photos	
Word cloud of spontaneous associations	

1. Executive summary

This report presents findings from deliberative research with members of the public to understand perceptions of and attitudes to the roles and purposes of museums in society.

- There is strong, positive emotional attachment to museums by both visitors and non-visitors. Indeed, it appears that attitudes toward museums have become more favourable over the last generation as they shed their image of stuffiness and sterility and become more entertaining and interactive.
- Participants had a relatively sophisticated understanding of museums as shaping our future as well as our past. As such they are seen as having an active role in sharing new knowledge rather, than as passive buildings simply storing objects.
- Museums hold a unique position of being trusted, which is particularly important given the perceived lack of trusted organisations in society such as the government and the media. Both of these are seen as biased and operating under agendas. Members of the public who took part, see museums as the guardians of factual information and as presenting all sides of the story.
- There exists a widespread sense that museums are under threat, due to lack of attendance, budget cuts or technological advance. This threat informs the public's evaluation of the possible purposes of museums and their role within society.
- There is a consistent perception of museums' current and essential purposes, and museums 'spreading themselves too thinly' is a concern. There is strong feeling that museums should concern themselves with what they are good at first and foremost. This stems from the idea that taking on additional purposes may undermine the essential purposes for which museums are presently revered.
- Without addressing the essential purposes that define museums, there is little license to talk about broader activities, particularly as the public do not necessarily see museums as the best placed organisations to deal with these.
- Public attitudes to the roles and purposes of museums were carefully explored during each workshop, and over the course of the research a relatively sophisticated and consistent hierarchy of purposes emerged. Participants were offered a range of purposes to comment on, as

proposed by the sector. The purposes explored in this research could be categorised as follows:

Essential purposes - Those that are mentioned spontaneously and are held as central to the definition of a museum. Furthermore, museums are particularly well placed to achieve these purposes relative to other institutions.

Care and preservation of heritage

- This was by some distance the most important purpose of a museum. Preservation of national heritage is strongly linked to national pride and identity, and this is seen as central to the very nature of museums. Preserving local heritage was also seen as crucial, particularly where industry has died out. This purpose was seen as important in its own right, but also in order to learn from past mistakes, to understand where we have got to as society and to appreciate how we live now in comparison to past generations.

Holding collections and mounting displays

- Whilst storage for its own sake is a crucial part of preserving heritage, participants stressed the importance of rotating collections to attract more visitors (whilst keeping high profile artefacts on display permanently) and that displays were as interactive and user-friendly as possible.

Creating knowledge for, and about, society

- Participants interpreted this purpose as being about public education, rather than academic or elite research. Museums are about education for everyone in society equally. The fact that the terminology ‘creating knowledge’ was consistently changed to ‘sharing knowledge’ emphasizes the perception of this as a fundamental part of what museums are for.
- This purpose was reinterpreted by participants in two ways:
 - *Entertaining education for all children*
 - *Trusted sources of information/learning for all adults*

Priority purposes - Those purposes that *should* be held by all museums. Though they are less important than essential purposes, and an institution can still be considered a museum if it doesn’t achieve these objectives, having these purposes should be a priority.

Promoting economic growth through tourism, investment and regeneration

- Whilst not always mentioned spontaneously, after discussion this purpose was seen as important, particularly for museums receiving government support. However, achieving a return on investment applies to all publicly funded institutions and is not unique to museums. For some, this was a by-product of the essential purposes of museums: if everything else is done well, economic return will follow.

- This purpose was reinterpreted by participants as:
 - *Promoting economic growth (esp. attracting tourists)*

Facilitating individual development through education, stimulation and building skills

- Education is covered in the essential purposes, and is especially relevant for all children in society. A wider ‘individual development’ purpose received less support. For adults the purpose of museums is less about ‘education’ than ‘inspiration’ and ‘information’. For most participants, this purpose was confined to education for children, although there was some support for skills development through volunteering and apprenticeships - but this was only relevant where people were seeking a career in museums.
- This purpose is covered in the essential purposes, although an additional reinterpretation by participants was:
 - *Facilitating academic/expert research*

Promote happiness and wellbeing

- Rather than being about broader objectives of mental health and wellbeing, this purpose was regarded by participants as being more about ‘entertainment’ for participants. This was inherently linked to a museum’s educative purpose, particularly in relation to the importance of active engagement in learning - as distinct from, say, a theme park or cinema.
- This purpose was reinterpreted by participants as being about entertainment (educational as well as inspirational)

Low priority purposes - Those purposes that aren’t objected to *per se* but are deemed to be low priority (and are often heavily qualified). Museums can seek to achieve these to an extent but, in doing so, resources should not be diverted away from essential or priority purposes. Additionally, if the museum is publicly funded, it should not, in furthering these purposes, perform specific roles already performed by other state bodies.

Fostering a sense of community

Helping the vulnerable

- Both these purposes were seen as being aimed at *specific* individuals or groups in society and were therefore somewhat at odds with the essential purposes that provide accessible benefits for *everyone* in society. The idea of museums reaching out into communities or sections of societies isn’t one that the public sees them as being the best placed to do. The public regards social services or charities as adding more value here.
- Some caveats to this included the role of museums in protecting and fostering a sense of identity and pride, and participants recognised that in more rural or remote areas, museums could play a greater part in the community. In terms of helping the vulnerable, participants were very much in support of museums being accessible and inclusive to all, including the most vulnerable in society.

- These purposes were reinterpreted by participants as:
 - *Bringing the community together*

Protecting the natural environment

- This was not suggested spontaneously as a purpose, and considered to be a topic that could be spoken about by museums, if relevant to the type of museum in question. Importantly, the role of museums here is to educate, rather than lecture to people or judge behaviour.

Purposes challenged by the public - Those that participants did not see as sitting easily with the essential purposes of museums. These potentially undermined the essential values of trust and integrity that people cherish with regards to museums:

Providing a forum for debate

Promoting social justice and human rights

- These purposes raised much discussion throughout the research process, and participants consistently agreed that museums were not appropriate environments in which to hold controversial debates. Rather, museums are regarded as places to go to find out factual and unbiased information and for people to subsequently make up their own minds about a particular topic.
- This is not to say that people felt museums cannot broach controversial subjects, but that they should remain neutral in the displaying of information, rather than act as a leader in telling people what to think.
- The role of museums is very much seen as having a moral standpoint, as opposed to a political standpoint. Indeed museums are seen as one of the last vestiges of trust (particularly in comparison to the government and the media which are seen as untrustworthy and agenda driven). The public want to keep their trust in museums by believing they are being given unbiased and non-politically driven information.
- In this sense, talking about these kind of roles and purposes requires very careful positioning in order to avoid diminishing public trust in museums.
- The public (negatively) interpreted these purposes as:
 - *Promoting a political/subjective viewpoint*

2. Objectives

The Museums Association commissioned BritainThinks to research public attitudes to the future of museums and their possible impact as part of the on-going development of the Museums 2020 vision. This research is intended to inform this process and help museums become more responsive and sustainable.

Although there had been much discussion of the themes in Museums 2020 within the sector, an understanding of the public's standpoint had remained underdeveloped. While individual museums may commission research into what would attract people to visit, little is known about what people think about museums in general and even less about their perceptions of the role of museums and their impacts.

Set against the backdrop of an expansive array of possible roles and purposes contained in the Museums 2020 Discussion Paper, the overarching objective of this research was to provide an answer to the following question:

What do citizens consider to be the most important purposes and roles against which public funding for museums should deliver?

In order to effectively ascertain the answer to this question, it was necessary to achieve a number of subsidiary objectives. One was to ensure that participants in the research adopted the perspective of a 'citizen' rather than an individual who either did or didn't visit museums. Another was to ensure that participants considered the potential purposes of museums, rather than just those purposes that they perceived museums to currently have, whilst also understanding how views are formed. Finally, it was important to detect any differences in participants' attitudes to museums and their potential purposes depending on the type of museum in question.

3. Methodology

The finding and insights in this report are the result of conducting a series of six day-long deliberative workshops with a total of ninety participants. The deliberative method permits participants to:

- Shift from a ‘consumer perspective’ - as a visitor or non-visitor to museums - to a ‘citizen perspective’, considering the requirements we demand of museums as a society
- Shift from thinking about the current purposes of museums to thinking about what purposes it would be desirable for museums to have in the future
- Be provided with high-quality information and the time to reflect on it so that they may adopt more informed and considered perspectives

The workshops were conducted across the UK, taking place in different types of museum in both rural and urban areas:

THE MUSEUM OF LONDON [PILOT] 18 Participants	YORK CASTLE MUSEUM 18 Participants
THE CARDIFF STORY 12 Participants	RIVERSIDE MUSEUM, GLASGOW 12 Participants
THE BEANEY, CANTERBURY 12 Participants	MUSEUM OF EAST ANGLIAN LIFE, STOWMARKET 18 Participants

This diversity of locations and types of museum meant that any differences in perceptions or attitudes that resulted from the location or type of museum could be identified, and that the findings reflected the viewpoint of more than just those citizens who live in urban areas or visit large national museums.

Participants were recruited to be reflective of the UK as a whole, in terms of gender, age, educational profile, occupational grouping and ethnicity. In order to ensure a balance between those familiar with museums and

those less familiar, the recruitment was structured so that half of the participants had visited a museum in the last year and half hadn't.

During the workshops, participants' attitudes were explored through a combination of open discussions and hands-on exercises:

<i>Free-writing exercise</i>	Unconstrained methods of ascertaining all top-of-mind associations about museums, from which background attitudes and perceptions of current purposes can be inferred prior to the provision of any information.
<i>Collage - 'what do museums mean to you?'</i>	
<i>Opening discussion - background views</i>	
<i>Multiple-choice quiz</i>	To simultaneously: gauge the extent to which participants are informed about the reality of museums and their wider impacts; and providing participants with new information to see whether their attitudes change.
<i>Obituary exercise ('A world without museums...')</i>	To simultaneously: understand the emotions felt toward museums and relationship between participants and museums; and infer perceptions of purposes currently held by museums.
<i>Open discussion on purposes of museums</i>	To explicitly ascertain participants' (spontaneous) perception of what purposes museums currently have as well as those they should have.
<i>Display of potential purposes</i>	To expand the range of potential purposes for participants to consider in order to ascertain whether any purposes other than those spontaneously mentioned are deemed desirable.
<i>Feedback on display</i>	
<i>Ranking exercise</i>	To understand initial prioritisation outside context of budgetary constraints.
<i>Allocating museums budget</i>	To further understand prioritisation of purposes and relative importance of each; and provide context of budgetary constraints.
<i>Open discussion on roles implementing purposes</i>	To ascertain whether attitudes to purposes change when forced to consider firm, practical implications and examples rather than abstractions.
<i>Collage - 'museums of the future'</i>	To ascertain how far perceptions of museums have shifted and attitudes to how far museums should change their purpose for the future.
<i>Plenary discussion</i>	To provide an opportunity to clarify insights obtained earlier.

"Quote boxes used throughout represent verbatim quotes in open discussion."

(Location of workshop)

4. Background perceptions

Although half of the participants were classified as ‘visitors’ (having visited at least once in the past year), there was a pervasive sense among participants in general that museums were underused.

A number of participants had not visited a museum since their school days, with some even claiming that they had no intention of ever visiting again. In some of the workshops, there was even a lack of awareness of the host museum’s existence by some local residents who passed it regularly. The most cited reasons for not visiting more often were less to do with a lack of interest and more to do with not making the time, the cost and effort of travel and a dislike of crowds and queuing.

“It’s one of those things that you see and want to do but keep putting off until it’s not there.”

East Anglia

Even among those who did visit museums, there was a strong perception that the circumstances of museum visits were clearly limited. For instance, visitors were assumed to either be retired or to be young children on school trips or with parents. Similarly, it was thought that you were much more likely to visit a museum as a tourist (either abroad or in a British town/city other than your own) than as a local resident.

In the obituary exercise, where participants were asked to imagine a world without museums, the most frequently cited cause of their demise was public apathy and infrequent visits. After the answers to the quiz were revealed, participants were often surprised by the number of visits made and by the increase in visits since the introduction of free entry to national museums, having underestimated both.

“A recipe for the death of a museum: 1kg of can’t be bothered; 1 bucket of sadness; 100g of quiet; 200g fatigue; 4oz remorse; 8oz regret; 1lb of silence; 3oz dust. Take a bright museum, mix financial pressures, lack of time from volunteers, and broken displays. Stir in the quiet, grind in the fatigue, put into a small tin and cover with grated remorse, regret and dust. Place a lid on top. Sprinkle silence and leave in a cold, dark place.”

East Anglia
(Obituary exercise)

Largely for this reason, there is a real sense of jeopardy amongst the public around the future of museums. Participants did not struggle to diagnose the cause of death during the obituary exercise and the results were strikingly consistent. As well as public apathy and lack of attendance, two other causes were regularly cited.

One was government spending cuts; the other was technological advance, either resulting in online archives replacing museums or children's preference for computer games over museum visits. The degree of consistency in responses to this exercise suggests the perception of plausible threats to the future of museums.

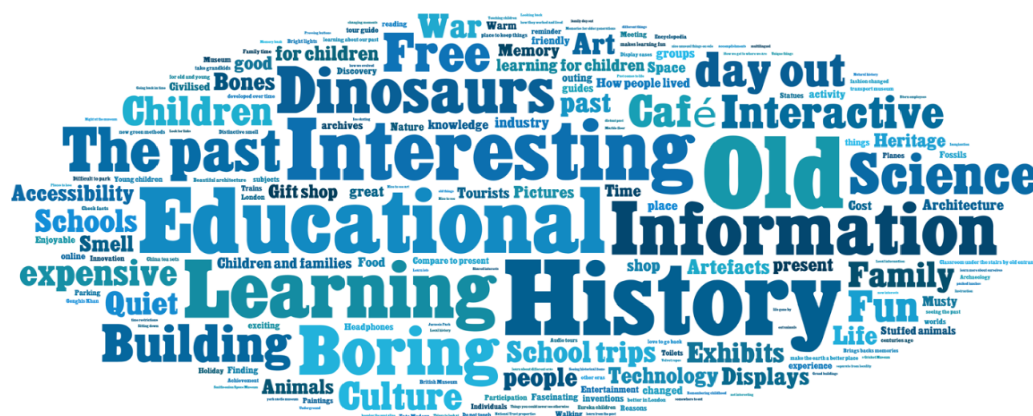
Despite most participants professing not to use museums very often, they felt very positive toward them. This was clearly evident from early on in the discussions and the initial exercises. In the obituaries, for instance, participants talked about widespread feelings of sadness and guilt, as well as a collective failure to appreciate museums until it was too late.

“You probably don’t think about how important they are in your daily life but when you really think about it, you remember how important they are.”

Where there was some negativity, it usually emanated from participants who hadn't been for decades and stemmed from perceptions held since school trips about museums being stuffy, aloof and boring. Over the course of the workshop and after the provision of information about the diversity and interactivity of museums, these participants professed to be pleasantly surprised and sometimes expressed an interest in visiting again in the future.

Interestingly, being a regular visitor was not a precondition for believing museums to be extremely important. Nor did frequency of visit even seem to correlate strongly with appreciating them. It was not, therefore, particularly difficult for participants to shift from a 'consumer perspective', where the worth of a museum depends on its specific value to the individual, to a 'citizen perspective', where museums are evaluated on the basis of their value to society.

Museums are so highly valued and positively regarded because of the purposes they are perceived to hold. These are explored in the following chapter.



[Word-cloud representing participants' top-of-mind associations of museums.]

5. The Purposes of museums

Participants' attitudes to the roles and purposes of museums were carefully teased out over the course of each workshop, as the outline agenda in the methodology shows.

In order to facilitate broader thinking and move away from museums' own perceptions of their future purposes, a range of potential purposes was introduced to participants. After reactions to these were gauged, participants were asked to assess purposes against each other in the budgeting exercise.

By the end of each workshop, a consistent and reasonably sophisticated hierarchy of purposes emerged. The germ of this hierarchy was evident in the early part of the day but, after discussion and evaluation of new information and prepared stimulus, a clearer and more nuanced position emerged.

The locations for the workshops were varied deliberately to encourage any differences to surface, resulting either from regional or national variation or from rural/urban distinction. Attitudes to the purposes of museums were, however, remarkably consistent both within and across the workshops, though there were some slight differences in a few locations. Where findings are presented in this report, they should be treated as generally reflective unless specific mention is made of variations.

5.1 Spontaneous attitudes

When thinking about museums spontaneously, it was clear that they are primarily felt to be about safeguarding heritage and allowing visitors to learn about history. These themes were clearly borne out in the discussions and in some of the exercises.

Participants talked of the importance of museums in safeguarding historical objects and preventing them being lost (including to private owners and to museums overseas). They also talked about museums being places for learning about the past and connecting it to the present and future.

"Museums are about educating yourself but also about the past, keeping the past alive."

York

Museums are seen to be places of learning for adults but especially for children. Indeed, children and families are central to the way participants talk about museums. Museums are seen as a fun and educational day out, either as a supplement to the more rigid education of schools or as a way for families to spend time together. In relation to their educational

purpose, there is a strong sense that museums had improved in recent times by becoming less aloof and more interactive and entertaining.

“Children are more likely to learn from museums than reading about things in school. You probably take in more information from one visit to a museum.”

Many had associations from their own childhoods that museums were gloomy, dusty and distanced from visitors, full of velvet ropes and ‘do not touch’ signs. Most are aware that this is no longer the case, although some (particularly those who hadn’t visited since school trips) still associated museums with these characteristics. After the provision of information and examples throughout the day (as well as being in a modern museum), virtually all participants regarded museums as interactive and entertaining places for children to learn. This was seen as major progress and the importance of lively engagement was often stressed.

“Museums are actually a lot more interesting than I thought they were. They’ve changed a lot since I was a child - I thought they were old and stuffy places but they’re actually a lot of fun.”

Canterbury

Although participants often noted that adults, too, learnt much from museum visits, they were less likely to talk about this process as ‘education’ and more likely to regard it as ‘gaining information on’ or ‘discovering’ something interesting. Though not always explicit, the degree of trust that participants had in museums was evident. They talked about museums containing ‘knowledge’ about, and ‘proof’ of, historical events - it became clear that they were seen as authoritative, reliable and accurate (and even *sources* of information rather than public-facing manifestations/representations of information from other sources).

“Charlie just asked who landed on the moon - how would we know? All records destroyed... All our ancestry lost. Where did we come from? How do we know that the queen should be sitting on the throne? Where’s the proof?”

Glasgow
(Obituary exercise)

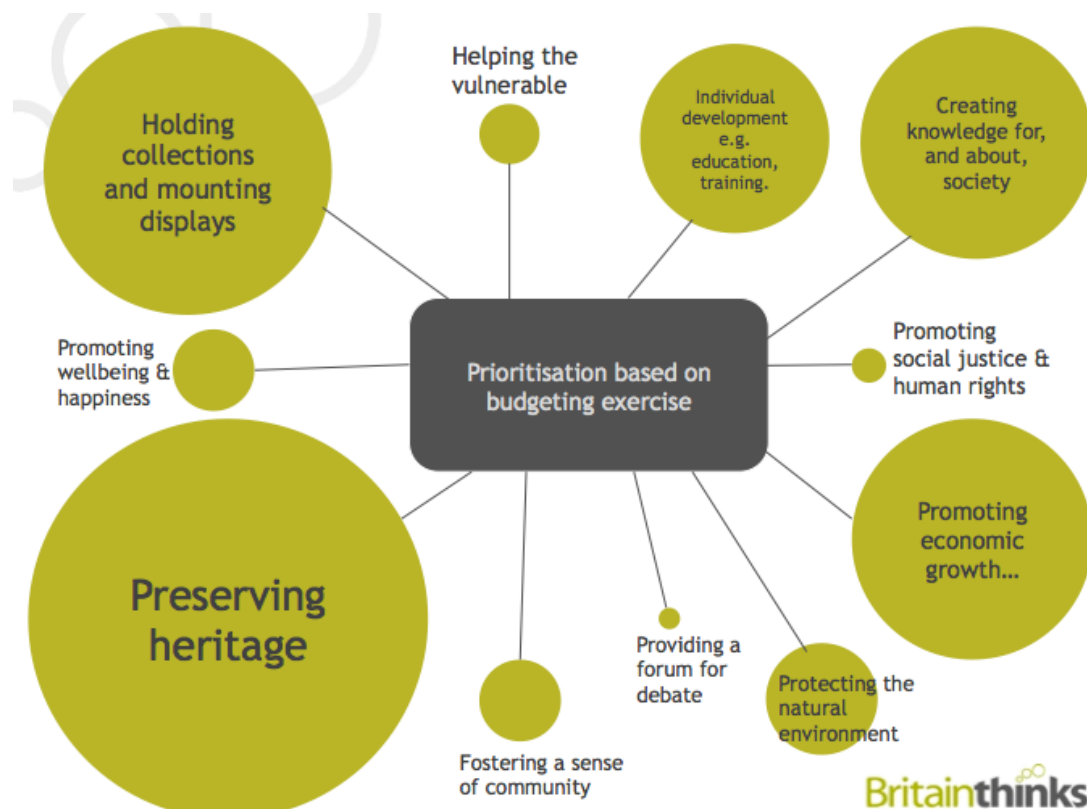
The final purpose for museums to emerge spontaneously was as a family activity - somewhere for families to spend time together outside home. During the obituary exercise, when participants considered what would vanish if all museums were to close, the four most conspicuous losses were: tangible/interactive education; heritage; knowledge about shared local or national history; and ‘a day out’ for parents and children. No others were mentioned spontaneously.

5.2 Post-stimulus attitudes

The spontaneous discussion of purposes was useful in revealing what participants believed the essential purposes of museums currently are. Such a spontaneous discussion is less effective at isolating what purposes participants think museums should, or could, achieve in the future. The participants were prompted by stimulus in order to get them to consider a wider range of possible purposes. These also encouraged them to think about what purposes museums should have going forward, rather than what purposes museums currently do have.

Having gathered input from the museums sector, eleven purposes were devised and prepared on 'stimulus boards'. These were large displays, each including the purpose, a paragraph explaining it, some possible roles a museum might play to achieve the purpose in question, and some examples of each. The stimulus boards are included in the Appendices. The point of introducing these to participants was not to test final, concrete purposes, or to simply see whether each was endorsed or not. Rather, it was to provoke discussion and encourage participants to re-categorise purposes in order to work through and better understand their own priorities.

In addition to these in-depth discussions on each purpose, participants also ranked the purposes as either 'must do', 'should do', 'can do' or 'should not do'. This was intended to provide a sense of the relative importance of each purpose. Their judgement was then strengthened in the budgeting exercise, where participants were forced to reconsider the relative importance of the different purposes in the context of financial limitations. Below is a graphic illustrating the proportion of team budgets allocated to each purpose:



Care and preservation of heritage

Having been spontaneously mentioned, this purpose gained a lot of support after the introduction of the stimulus boards and received the most funding in the budgeting exercise. It was defined predominantly as national heritage (i.e. British for participants in workshops in England, Scottish/Welsh in the Glasgow/Cardiff workshops). There was also an interest in local heritage, particularly where local industries have died out.

Care and *"It's more about preserving ancient artefacts from history, keeping them safe. You can't exactly chuck them out, can you?"*
Cardiff

preservation of heritage is viewed as being an important means to ensure the past is learnt from and that children appreciate the way we live now compared to previous generations. Crucially, however, it is also deemed important for its own sake. Participants thought it was vital that historic artefacts were kept safe even if never (or very rarely) displayed to the

"[Care and preservation of heritage] is what museums are all about. A museum without this would be like a zoo without animals."
Canterbury

public. The museum therefore has an important 'hoarding' role. Indeed, participants responded favourably to the museum having a role as 'society's attic'.

Holding collections and mounting displays

Holding collections and mounting displays received the second-highest amount of funding in the budgeting exercise and was seen as a 'must do' activity by all participants. Although storage for its own sake is seen as a crucial part of preserving heritage, many were surprised by the proportion of collections held in storage and stressed the importance of keeping as much on display as possible. Exhibitions are to be rotated as much as possible (although some were aware of the importance of keeping high-profile artefacts on display permanently so as not to disappoint less regular visitors). Furthermore, it is crucial that displays are as interactive and user-friendly as possible rather than being sterile and roped-off.

"Without museums, you'd have to use the internet to discover about our past - but you'd never get to see it for yourself in real life or touch it."
Cardiff

Creating knowledge for, and about, society

Although this purpose was very popular, receiving the fourth-highest funding in the budgeting exercise and being classed as a ‘must do’ purpose by almost all, it was interpreted slightly differently to how it was intended to be understood. Rather than being about the process of academic or elite research, it is understood to be about public education. Indeed, a number of participants in different locations spontaneously changed the wording of the stimulus board from ‘creating knowledge’ to ‘sharing knowledge’.

“I think the words ‘I never knew that’ sum museums up pretty well because you learn something new every time you go.”

Cardiff

The concept of creating new knowledge is difficult to understand for most participants, although many did stress the important roles museums might have in academic research. However, they tended to see a distinction between museums and universities: whereas universities are exclusively for research by - and dialogue between - specialist experts, museums are places where expertise can be shared with the public. In particular, museums were an important tool for sharing new information about the local area.

“This is good. It’s exactly what museums are about: getting the chance to learn something from the experts.”

York

Promoting economic growth through tourism, investment and regeneration

Although this was not always initially mentioned as a purpose of museums, promoting economic growth was seen as important after the introduction of the stimulus board (which outlined some of the positive economic impacts museums have had) and the quiz (where several of the questions concerned museum employment and tourist numbers). This is seen as an especially important purpose for those museums receiving government support (although this need for a return on investment is likely to be common to all publicly-funded institutions and not unique to museums). A small number of participants, however, saw this as a by-product rather than standalone purpose: if everything else is done well, economic impact will follow.

“Absolutely - every one should be doing this. Especially if they’re getting council money.”

East Anglia

This

purpose tends to be construed quite narrowly as being either primarily about attracting tourists or about wider investment and regeneration. Participants felt it easier to appreciate the economic impact that related to their locality. In tourist cities like York and Canterbury, for example, participants interpreted this purpose as about attracting tourists who spend money in local shops, while in Glasgow investment, jobs and local regeneration were more prominent where memories of the decline of traditional industry were fresh.

"It's good for business as well. Museums need to make money for the place. They bring people, tourists, here to Cardiff and they go for lunch, spend their money, buy souvenirs, coffees and so on."

Cardiff

Facilitating individual development through education, stimulation and building skills

Education is seen as an absolutely core purpose, although it was sometimes seen as covered by the 'Creating knowledge...' stimulus board while the 'Facilitating individual development...' board was sometimes seen as about building skills. Either way, it became clear that participants fully supported museums' educational purpose, especially for children. For adults, the language of 'discovery', 'inspiration' and 'information' was preferred to education, though the purpose appeared to be the same in substance.

Support for

"Children are more likely to learn from museums than reading about things at school. You probably take in more information from one visit to a museum."

York

this

stimulus board was limited to education (and, specifically, as a supplement to formal school education for children and informal 'hobby-

"I think we should educate people about our history and how people used to live but I don't think museums should be teaching people English."

York

learning' for adults). A wider 'individual development' purpose for museums received very little support, especially not in terms of teaching/training people in areas unrelated to core museum purposes. There is some support for skills development through volunteering and apprenticeship, but only for people seeking careers relevant to museums.

Promote well-being and happiness

While the stimulus board for this purpose was quite wide-ranging, it was only endorsed (albeit very strongly) in a narrow sense. Rather than being about broader objectives of mental health and well-being, it meant

‘entertainment’ to participants. Furthermore, rather than being ‘pure’ entertainment, a museum’s entertainment purpose is inherently linked to its educative purpose. Participants saw museums’ entertainment role as very clearly distinguished from that of a theme park or cinema. Indeed, entertainment is not really seen as a standalone purpose for museums but rather as a clarification of the ‘education’ purpose.

“They need to be entertaining but not like a theme park does. It has to be enjoyable so that people can learn about what they want to tell us about. If it’s not entertaining, no-one will go.”

Canterbury

Nevertheless, this clarification is seen as extremely important. As aforementioned, many participants remembered museums as being restrictive, sterile and boring from their own schooldays. Discovering that many museums had become much more interactive and entertaining surprised many participants and some spontaneously suggested that they would be much more likely to visit in future as a result. Without being entertaining or interactive, museums would be much less effective at educating children or keeping children happy while parents visit museums.

“If I think back to when I was at school, they have come a long way in terms of this, haven’t they? They are making them so much more interactive.”

Protect the natural environment

Although this was never spontaneously cited as an important purpose for museums, protecting the natural environment received some support. It is seen as especially relevant for some specialist museums, like the Science Museum, or rural museums, where nature plays an important part. However, museums’ role in protecting the environment is confined to educating visitors about the environment (and climate change) rather than campaigning or encouraging ‘greener’ behaviour directly.

“I want the information to be factual and accurate and to make my own mind up. I care about the environment but don’t want to be lectured about it in a museum.”

East Anglia

Interestingly, and despite their resistance to campaigning, most participants did not see protecting the natural environment as a political issue in same the way as promoting social justice or promoting human rights. Climate change is seen as ‘affecting everyone’ and not a matter for political debate. Even when directly challenged on this, citing the US where environmental issues are more visibly political, the majority of participants were more likely to see the environment as a politically neutral topic - although a minority did see it as a political issue.

“I agree we should save the environment but is this the right arena? Museums should educate people on what’s happening but leave other agencies to actually sort the problems out.”

London

Foster sense of community

Fostering a sense of community is deemed an important purpose of museums to the extent that they could help protect and create a sense of identity and pride (both local and national). There is support for museums having a role in supporting local or national history and culture. It was not discussed on the stimulus board, however, and there is no strong support for museums playing a more tangible role in the community.

“I liked the identity bit in this one - you definitely see that locally here.”

Canterbury

Most struggled to understand the idea of a museum as a ‘public’ or ‘civic’ space, beyond somewhere to go with family and friends. In keeping with general public antipathy to the idea (or at least language) of ‘community’, the idea of meeting new people or interacting with people other than friends and family was puzzling to most participants. Participants were agreed that museums could be used as a meeting place for local organisations but only if doing so didn’t divert resources or otherwise detract from other, more important priorities.

It is

“Did you see that knitting club downstairs in the café? I don’t get that at all - why would you meet up in a museum café to do that?”

Canterbury

worth noting that most workshops were held in relatively built-up areas. As such, it is possible that in the most remote areas, local residents might deem it desirable for museums play a much greater part within the community. Indeed, participants in the workshop in Stowmarket, the most rural location for the six workshops, were slightly more inclined than

participants elsewhere to want museums to play a greater part in community life. One participant was a weekly visitor to the Museum of East Anglian Life, another had volunteered there whilst at school and several others were aware of various activities and events arranged by the museum.

Helping the vulnerable

Helping the vulnerable was never mentioned spontaneously as a desirable purpose for museums and generally did not receive much support after the introduction of the stimulus board. There is opposition to the idea of museums doing outreach work with vulnerable groups. For some, the concept is just too alien to understand. Others thought that museums wouldn't be the most effective organisations to achieve this and that charities, social services or 'the council' were better positioned. There is concern that public money would be wasted if different institutions had overlapping responsibilities toward the vulnerable.

"Social services should look after the vulnerable and museums should look after the history."

London

There is one distinct facet of helping the vulnerable, which did receive universal and unqualified support, however. This was to do with the obligation museums have to be accessible and inclusive to all, including the most vulnerable in society. This was in terms of free/cheap entry as well as physical aids for the disabled. Some, particularly those with vulnerable family members, felt that museums did not currently always achieve this.

"I don't think museums have done enough in the past to help people with disabilities to enjoy museums. My daughter is blind and it's been quite difficult in the past."

York

Promoting social justice and human rights

This stimulus board was strongly rejected by almost all participants, who were very hostile to the idea of museums being political, polemical, hectoring or didactic. Participants view museums as incredibly trustworthy and believe that they present balanced, accurate and objective 'facts'. This is in stark contrast to other public institutions, such as the media, politicians and business, which the public sees as biased, politically motivated and fundamentally untrustworthy.

"Museums shouldn't be political, they should stimulate thinking and be informative only. Just tell us the facts and let us make our own minds up."

Glasgow

Adopting a subjective and opinionated stance, or seeking to influence visitors' opinions, is strongly opposed and would be seen as infringing the museum's trusted objectivity. Though the museums sector may doubt the possibility of neutral presentation of objective knowledge, the public does not. Whilst still strongly sceptical of the idea, participants would, if promoting a particular standpoint was inevitable, prefer museums be clear and explicit about where the balanced information ends and the 'campaigning' starts, (e.g. the 'campaign zone' in the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool). Despite this qualification, 'promoting social justice and human rights' received very little funding in the budgeting exercise.

"No - if I want someone telling me what to think, I'll pick up a newspaper or turn on the telly. That's not what museums are there for."
Cardiff

Provide a forum for public debate

This was the other purpose that was comprehensively rejected by participants. The idea that a museum would go out of its way to incorporate controversial or divisive topics was seen as puzzling and this purpose received the least funding in the budgeting exercise, as well as being branded a 'must not' purpose. Furthermore, debates and controversy were seen as possibly undermining one of the core museum purposes, namely to provide a family-friendly, enjoyable and entertaining day out.

"Museums shouldn't be a place for a social fight. That should be with your MP. It should be a place for learning and fun, to be transported to a different place. Don't drag museums into all the arguing that goes on everywhere else."

Glasgow

Participants were, however, less opposed to the idea of collections prompting civilised debate than they were about museums hosting unpleasantness or hostility - largely because the former would not detract from the family atmosphere in the way the latter would. There was a positive response to the example of the Future Foods exhibition at the Science Museum as the topic was not seen as particularly divisive and the museum appeared balanced and neutral, presenting both sides of the story. The term 'debate' was associated with conflict and hostility, witnessed (and not appreciated) in daily life, TV shows and the House of Commons, rather than being stimulated to discuss things with friends/family and as a form of learning actively.

"The language here terrifies me to be honest - what's the point? You take a nice, pleasant, calm environment like a museum and turn it into Jeremy Kyle."

5.3 Reinterpreted hierarchy of purposes

A new categorisation and hierarchy of purposes can be established after careful interpretation of participants' responses to the stimulus boards. These responses were measured not only in open deliberation of each stimulus board, but also in the budgeting exercise and ranking exercise.

<i>Name of purpose</i>	<i>Spontaneously suggested</i>	<i>Necessity level</i>	<i>Rank in budgeting exercise</i>
Care and preservation of heritage	Yes	Must do	1st
Holding collections and mounting displays	Yes	Must do	2nd
Creating knowledge for, and about, society	Yes	Must do	4th
Promoting economic growth through tourism, investment and regeneration	Yes	Should do	3rd
Facilitating individual development through education, stimulation and building skills	Yes	Should do	5th
Promote well-being and happiness	Yes	Should do	8th
Protect the natural environment	No	Can do	6th
Foster sense of community	Mixed	Can do	7th
Helping the vulnerable	No	Can do	9th
Promoting social justice and human rights	No	Should not do	10th
Provide a forum for public debate	No	Should not do	11th

Because participants rarely bluntly endorsed or rejected a purpose from the original stimulus board in its totality, but offered a more nuanced analysis, adding conditions, caveats and qualifications to each, this reviewed grouping better reflects their attitudes to the purposes of museums:

ESSENTIAL PURPOSES

The essential purposes are those that must be held by all museums. Indeed, they are so central that they form part of the definition of a museum. Furthermore, museums are particularly well placed to achieve these purposes relative to other institutions.

- *Care, preservation and display of heritage (national and local)*

Care, preservation and display of heritage is by some distance the most important purpose of a museum and incorporates the substance of the two stimulus boards that received the greatest funding. Participants were clear that both storing artefacts of historic value for its own sake (i.e. to prevent it being lost, either absolutely or to private owners or overseas) and to display them to the public are central to the very

nature of museums. Both local and national heritage are seen as crucial.

- *Entertaining education for all children*

Museums have a clear role to play in children's education, especially as they provide an interactive, enjoyable alternative to rigid classroom learning. Moreover, this education should be available to *all* children, with the accessibility/inclusivity aspect of the 'helping the vulnerable' stimulus board deemed particularly important.

- *Trusted sources of information/learning for all adults*

Educating adults is also seen as an essential purpose, although participants tended to avoid the language of 'education' and talked about the museum's purpose being to inspire/stimulate, facilitate 'discovery', 'share knowledge' and provide information. Crucially, this is an important purpose for museums in particular because they are seen as a trustworthy, unbiased source of information: as a result, information presented must not be (or must not be seen to be) prejudiced or subjective.

Provided the information conforms to these strict rules, it can relate to a broad range of subject-matters (including climate change and protecting the environment). Again, the importance of accessibility/inclusivity means that a museum must provide trusted information for *all* adults, including the vulnerable.

PRIORITY PURPOSES

Priority purposes are those purposes that *should* be held by all museums, though they are less important than essential purposes.

- *Promoting economic growth (esp. attracting tourists)*

Though this purpose was rarely raised spontaneously and was never viewed as definitional, economic impact is an expected return on public investment in museums, particularly in times of belt-tightening. The economic impact of museums most prominent to participants is attracting tourists to local towns and cities.

- *Facilitating academic/expert research*

Although 'creating knowledge for, and about, society' was a popular stimulus board, it was interpreted as being about education for the masses (and thus an essential purpose) rather than academic/expert research. Nevertheless, the academic/expert research element still received some support and was occasionally raised spontaneously.

Participants were aware of the importance of expert input and saw museums as a place to learn from it.

LOW PRIORITY PURPOSES

Dispensable purposes are those purposes that aren't objected to *per se* but are deemed to be low priority (and are often heavily qualified). Museums can seek to achieve these to an extent but, in doing so, resources should not be diverted away from essential or priority purposes. Additionally, if the museum is publicly funded, it should not, in furthering these purposes, perform specific roles already performed by other state bodies.

- *Bringing the community together*

Museums are not seen as 'civic spaces' and participants were reluctant to strongly endorse them as somewhere for the community to come together. Rather than a broader community, they are seen as places for a day-out for families and friends. Remembering local history and culture, while important, is seen as falling under the core purpose of 'care and preservation of heritage'. However, social activities and events could be encouraged at museums provided they don't use up resources (e.g. occupying a room in a museum that would otherwise have been unused at the time). It is possible that, in the most remote locations, fostering a sense of community is deemed a more important purpose.

- *Helping the vulnerable*

Beyond accessibility/inclusivity, which is seen as a mandatory requirement (and included as such within the essential purposes), helping the vulnerable is seen as a low priority. Participants were concerned about using scarce museum resources achieving this purpose, especially when there are perceived to be better-placed state agencies already concerned with this (e.g. social services).

PURPOSES CHALLENGED BY THE PUBLIC

Those purposes that participants did not see as sitting easily with the essential purposes of museums and potentially as undermining the essential values of trust and integrity that people cherish with regards to museums.

- *Providing a forum for debate/argument*

Museums can passively stimulate debate by presenting arguments for and against an issue. They should not, according to participants, encourage argument or hostility by selecting acutely contentious or

controversial issues as this may detract from the essential purpose of a museum to provide an entertaining and enjoyable arena for families and children to learn.

- *Promoting a political/subjective viewpoint*

Promoting any biased or subjective perspective is not deemed an appropriate purpose for museums, which are revered as trustworthy sources of balanced information. If issues of a political nature are to be included in a collection, they should be presented neutrally and accompanied by arguments for and against, with neither being actively/deliberately promoted by the museum itself. If this is the case, it falls within the core purpose of providing trustworthy information.

6 Conclusions

The most immediate finding from this research was the strong, resilient positivity felt toward museums and the passion which some of the discussions elicited. Interestingly, this was displayed by visitors and non-visitors alike, suggesting that museums are perceived to have a societal role that is broader than just satisfying individual visitors. The context for this emotional response is a widespread perception that the future of museums is threatened, either by diminishing attendance, budget cuts or technological advance.

Against

this *"We don't want to be writing any epitaphs for museums - let's get the core purposes sorted."*

London

backdrop, there is a clear impression of what purposes museums currently have and this strongly informs attitudes to those that they should have in the future. The reluctance to endorse purposes beyond those considered 'essential' does not simply reflect a lack of imagination or a stubborn reluctance to evaluate (rather than describe) the purposes of museums. Instead, there is an intuitive sense (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit) that moving beyond them would undermine the core purposes of a museum.

"Museums only have so much resource, they should stick with the key aspects first."

York

The essential purposes - care, preservation and display of heritage; entertaining education for all children; and trustworthy information for all adults - explain why museums are held in such high regard. They help to define what a museum is and, furthermore, constitute desirable goals which museums are extremely well-placed to achieve compared to other societal institutions.

Museums are uniquely positioned to care for, preserve and display shared heritage, with items of historical importance otherwise either lost to private owners or altogether for want of storage facility. Similarly, museum visits, particularly to modern and interactive, hands-on ones, are perceived to be an inimitable way of encouraging children to learn and to enjoy learning, especially compared to formal schooling. Finally, museums are in a rare position of being trusted to provide accurate and reliable information in a national conversation increasingly dominated by bias and vested interest.

"Museums do have a good image and they'll remain trustworthy if they stay out of the politics."

London

It is because these core purposes are deemed so important, and because museums are well-placed to achieve them, that museums are so admired. It is also for these reasons that there is a reluctance to endorse additional purposes: there is a concern that museums will undermine their core purposes and overreach themselves, a concern that is particularly acute given the perceived threats to their continued existence. Significantly, these additional purposes are not deemed undesirable in their own right but there is a strong belief that other institutions are better placed to fulfil them (especially in a time of economic and budgetary uncertainty).

"They will have to develop the way they display things otherwise they'll become antiquities in their own right but they shouldn't change the fact that they're doing displays."

Canterbury

There is not, however, an aversion to any form of evolution. Indeed, museums are widely seen (by all except those who haven't visited since school) as having changed for the better over the last generation, going from stuffy, sterile and boring to entertaining, interactive and stimulating. This change led to the incorporation of an element of entertainment into the museums' core purpose of education and suggests that attitudes to purposes of museums are not always conditioned by the purposes they are currently seen as having. Furthermore, there was widespread acceptance that museums will have to continue to modernise and evolve, particularly in terms of accessibility, sustainability and the incorporation of technology.

"I think it's a good thing, the institution has to think on its feet to survive. It needs to evolve."

York

7 Implications for Museums 2020

The central proposition of the Museums 2020 vision is that “every museum can do more to improve people’s lives and play a part in meeting society’s needs” (*Museums 2020 Discussion Paper*, Introduction, p.4). Yet members of the public who took part in the research strongly believe that museums already meet some of society’s most important needs, needs that might well otherwise go unmet. Furthermore, they are resistant to the idea that museums should be focusing all their attention on doing *more* than this, for fear that in doing so they forget to attend these needs.

If, as is stated in the Museums 2020 discussion paper, “the challenge is to move on from a generalised sense that a museum provides public benefit by merely existing, to identifying how it can best make a defined and explicit contribution” (p.4), then it would seem that the public believes museums are already doing this. Far from having merely a nebulous sense that museums are good for society, this research has revealed that the participants have a sophisticated understanding of the benefits that museums provide and a clear sense of what their purposes are and should be.

Participants see the defined and explicit contribution made by museums as resulting from the fulfilment of their essential purposes, namely care and preservation of heritage and providing entertaining education for all children and trustworthy information for all adults. Beyond that, museums can and should also provide benefits through facilitating expert research and attracting tourists and investment. The findings from our research would strongly support the assertion that museums enjoy “unparalleled respect and trust” (p.4) but would add that this veneration is already being put to good use.

As this report has outlined, there exist robust views on the roles that should and should not be adopted by museums. They have been grouped into essential purposes, priority purposes, low priority purposes and purposes that are challenged by the public. If, as suggested in Museums 2020, museums *are* to do more to improve people’s lives, they must not do so at the expense of essential or priority purposes. Furthermore, these additional contributions must be built on the foundations of, and relate to, the essential purposes.

Analysing some of the themes of Museums 2020 in the context of the research is illustrative. One such theme is ‘making a difference for communities’ and the suggestion that “museums can strengthen communities by bringing people together, validating the experiences of particular groups and supporting community organisations” (p.8). Yet, while the public do value the contribution made by museums to the sense of local pride and distinctiveness, they do not see museums (nor many other institutions, local or national) as ‘community hubs’ or ‘civic spaces’. Rather, they visit museums as individuals or as a family or as friends;

there is little existing community spirit to strengthen and, as indicated in the research, the public often finds the notion of community activity puzzling.

By way of contrast, the benefits of museums are seen as general and societal, meeting society's needs and not just those who visit. Although museums can 'make a difference for individuals', this should be an impact which is universally available and strictly related to the essential purposes of 'inspiration, learning and enjoyment' as in the current UK definition of a museum. A museum's impact should not be targeted at particular, distinctive groups, even if they are vulnerable groups. If, as the Museums 2020 Discussion Paper suggests, 'social work' "is increasingly seen by museums as a core activity" (p.6), this view is not shared - or supported - by the public. Such work can be done by museums if directly relevant to essential purposes but it must not divert resources from them.

A third theme is strengthening participation and "opening up museums to a range of voices" (p.10). In one sense, the public do seek participation and interaction with museums and reject a wholly unilateral relationship. They prefer entertaining, interactive collections to the image of stuffy, distant displays of artefacts in glass cabinets. They also want to arrive at their own opinions after engaging with the information provided, rather than being passive recipients of didactic opinion. They are, however, less interested in participating in the decision-making process behind collections and displays, presumably because it undermines their reliability and trustworthiness. The Discussion Paper is right to identify the public expectation that museums are authoritative places for learning and that some participatory practice can be seen as "a threat to the role of a museum as a definitive source of knowledge and expertise" (p.10).

A fourth proposed impact of museums in the Discussion Paper is "to address the issues that matter most to society and to promote beneficial social change" (p. 14). This is the most obvious instance of what the public would perceive to be a museum undermining an essential purpose while attempting to improve people's lives. People often visit museums to escape social tensions, prominent issues and their more general prosaic concerns. They believe that museums should be places to escape from these everyday frictions and thus be wary of "controversy, debate and opinion" (p.14). Moreover, embracing political stances and attempting to shape values, even (or especially) if in a transparent manner, is seen by the public as betraying the museum's essential purpose of providing trustworthy information.

As already stated, the public have a clear perception of the essential purposes of museums and strongly believe that any additional objectives must relate to them and not undermine them. If the expansive Museums 2020 vision is to be realised, this message must be understood and incorporated both into thinking about the future of museums and into dialogue with the public.

Acknowledgements

The Museums Association would like to thank the sponsors of this project, namely Arts Council England; CyMAL: Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales, and Museums Galleries Scotland. We are particularly grateful to James Doeser and Guy Purdey; Lesley-Anne Kerr and Matthew Linning. We are indebted to the project's advisory group: David Anderson; Katy Archer; David Fleming; Joanna Jones; Gareth Maeer; Nick Merriman; Sally MacDonald; Mark O'Neill, as well as Will Adams; Maurice Davies; Sharon Heal and Mark Taylor from the Museums Association. We are also grateful to the project's manager, Sara Selwood.

APPENDIX

BritainThinks Workshops Agenda

Museums Association

Aim		Start time	End time	Materials
Arrivals	Coffee and Arrivals	9.30	10.00	Name badges, sign in sheets
Welcome	Welcome, introductions, briefing about the day Table introductions and what objects you brought	10.00	10.15	-
Background perceptions and attitudes towards museums	Free writing exercise Initial collage: what do museums mean now? Participants work in threes using magazines/papers to design collages Brainstorm: background views of museums, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants' experiences of visiting museums Participants' understanding of different types of museums 	10.15	11.00	Magazines, packs of pens etc, flip charts
Develop knowledge of museums	'Pub Quiz': provision of information on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Types of museum Activities museums undertake Funding of museums 	11.00	11.30	Pub Quiz print outs
Break	Coffee Break	11.30	12.00	
Imagining purposes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorm: purposes of museums Obituary: what would we lose if all museums closed? Presentation: suggested/potential purposes of museums (and examples) 	12.00	13.00	Purposes and roles boards
Break	Lunch	13.00	13.45	
Prioritising purposes	Budget allocations for selected purposes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial allocation in groups of six Communal feedback and discussion	13.45	14.45	Paper money, A2 sheets showing purposes
Roles	Brainstorm: what kind of roles would museums need to have to achieve the purposes discussed? How would museums prioritise roles within budgetary constraints? which are crucial, nice to have, unnecessary	14.45	15.30	
Break	Coffee Break	15.30	16.00	

Wrapping up	<p>Second collage -what museums will look like in 2020? Participants to work in threes and decide how they want to present this (e.g. write a letter to someone, letter to the prime minister, advert, poster, newspaper article)</p> <p>Feedback and plenary discussion</p>	16.00	17.00	Flipchart paper, pens, post-its, magazines
-------------	--	-------	-------	--

PURPOSE BOARDS

Care and preservation of heritage

Museums concern themselves with researching, preparing and maintaining collections. Collecting and displaying are undertaken for their own sake and museums are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.

Roles:

- Caring for and preserving items for future generations
- Survival of stories
- Creating a sense of place, identity and belonging
- Being society's 'attic'

Examples:

- Rosetta Stone, British Museum
- Scientific plant and animal specimens, Natural History Museum
- Important items of local history in local museums
- Pre-Raphaelite and Lowry paintings in Manchester Art Gallery

Holding collections and mounting displays

Museums safeguard and develop collections, create knowledge and contribute to cultural life. They see themselves as serving society. Collections are central to museums' cultural activity and are used by society in many ways: for education, for a wide range of research from family history to cutting edge science. Temporary exhibitions draw attention to different aspects of art, science and history, sometimes creating wide public interest

Roles:

- Museums acting as guardians of collections that belong to everyone, rather than acting as private owners of collections
- Enabling people to explore the world and making places real and tangible
- Giving status to ideas, people and communities
- Creating interactive experiences

Examples:

- Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site operates 10 museums that collectively tell the story of the birthplace of the industrial revolution
- Brighton Museum and Art Gallery displays items from the history of the city and also has special collections, including modern furniture
- Science Museum Who Am I? interactive exhibition invites visitors to explore the science of who they are through intriguing objects, provocative artworks and hands-on exhibits

Creating knowledge for, and about, society

Museums hold collections, develop culture and create knowledge for society. They help enable a process of learning and sharing knowledge between specialist experts and the general public. This process of sharing helps gives confidence to people to ask questions and interrogate assumptions and to share their views. Increasingly, local people are playing a part in helping to plan and provide content and ideas for museum displays

Roles:

- Researching local history
- Examination of materials
- Understanding the origins of objects
- Inspire and help experts and local people to pursue their own interests

Examples:

- Archaeology in Yorkshire Museum, art collections in Leeds Art Gallery
- Doing research into Egyptian Mummies at Manchester Museum and into culture of Native Americans at Pitt Rivers Museum
- Natural History Museum's Slavery & Nature project - working in partnership with an African grass-roots organisation - invited local residents, community partners, activists and cultural professionals to partake in a number of consultations
- M Shed, the Museum of Bristol includes displays prepared with input from local communities and places where you can add your own thoughts and historical information

Facilitating individual development through education, stimulation and building skills

All museums support learning and to stimulate thought and reflection. They can foster a sense of enquiry and promote equality and diversity. They offer thought-provoking and inspiring experiences to help people make meaning and better understand the world. They provide opportunities for contemplation, curiosity and creativity. There is a growth in museums serving people with distinct needs such as those with dementia, or people with English as a second language

Roles:

- Working with schools to teach art, history and science, and also support literacy and numeracy
- Evening classes and workshops for adults and children
- Work experience/structured volunteering
- Increase people's employability

Examples:

- St Fagans, National History Museum (Wales) supporting English-language lessons for people in the local area.
- Lincolnshire Heritage Service offers apprenticeships for a diverse range of young people to build skills
- Liverpool Museum provides educative and informative collections and displays, hosts events and provides online resources for teachers and schools

Promote well-being and happiness

The government believes that a vibrant cultural life contributes to health and well-being and museums are well-placed to improve individual wellbeing, quality of life and contribute to mental health by providing enriching cultural stimulus. This is about providing both entertainment and health-related programmes that are aimed at groups who could benefit more than usual. Museums provide places where people can: learn, be active, meet others, give something (e.g. their time, by volunteering), take notice and see new and inspiring things

Roles:

- Provide opportunities to actively participate and contribute thoughts and comments to displays
- Host events, 'hands-on' collections or workshops

Examples:

- Museum of London hosts 'Come and play in the park' events where families can go and play some popular games Victorian children might have played.
- Playful Museums days at the Manchester Museum help staff promote and explore playful behaviour in the museum to enhance well-being and happiness of children and families
- The Natural History Museum holds monthly sleepovers for 8-11 year olds called Dino Snores, including torch-lit trails, live shows, design workshops, etc.

Promoting economic growth through tourism, investment and regeneration

The creative and cultural industries are a key part of economic prosperity in the UK. Museums make an important contribution to the economy, generating benefits through jobs, tourism, inward investment and regeneration. 4/5 of the top tourist attractions are museums and foreign visitors cite museums and galleries as being amongst the prime reasons for visits to the UK. Museums attract people to places they may not otherwise visit, supporting local hotels and other businesses

Roles:

- Encouraging tourism
- Generating custom for local hotels, cafes, shops
- Encouraging regeneration and investment in nearby area
- Boosting the profile and reputation of an area, encouraging inward investment
- Employing people directly

Examples:

- In Bristol, the revitalised Museum of Bristol is a key component of the city's aspirations for cultural regeneration and is proving to be a powerful focus for attracting inward investment to create new facilities, services and jobs
- According to McKinsey, Tate Modern generated £100m worth of economic activity and 3,000 new jobs in its first year. In only one year Tate Modern had become the third most visited tourist attraction in Britain and the anchor attraction on the South Bank, drawing attention and people to a previously undiscovered and undeveloped area of London
- Ironbridge Gorge Museum is committed to promoting Green Tourism and works on a number of environmental schemes with schools and community groups

Helping the vulnerable

Increasingly, museums believe every citizen has the right to museum services that meet their interests and needs. Some vulnerable people might not choose to visit museum displays or exhibitions, so museums take extra steps to try to help improve some vulnerable people's lives. This comes from a belief in the entitlement of the whole of society to benefits that museums can provide.

Roles:

- Being inclusive and accessible to all
- Drawing attention to the plight of the vulnerable (e.g. in exhibitions)
- Outreach: actively working with under-represented audiences where they are, for example in community centres or care homes, rather than in museum buildings
- Using a museum's resources to try to help improve vulnerable people's self-esteem, confidence and participation in the community

Examples:

- Community engagement project coordinated by Colchester and Ipswich Museums Service. 'Out in the Open' is a project that actively engages people who are homeless, community partners and the public. It has also produced original, challenging imagery that will be displayed at locations in the town. The project has involved working with people who are homeless in Colchester on a number of projects, which aim to highlight the many stories of hidden homelessness and engage the public with the stories of people who are homeless in Colchester.
- Museum of East Anglian Life runs a range of learning programmes, using its historic buildings, landscape and collections to inspire vulnerable people. This includes training and skills development for learning for disabled adults and long term unemployed, a resettlement programme for inmates from a local prison, therapeutic placements for mental health service users, reminiscence training for carers of people with early stage dementia and training schemes for young people with behavioral problems

Foster sense of community

Museums can act as 'contact zones', bringing people and groups together. They can act as public spaces where things happen, new versions of town halls or market squares. They can contribute to a sense of local pride and define local distinctiveness. They can also enhance understanding between communities, creating peace where otherwise conflict or misunderstanding might arise, as well as helping with reconciliation, remembering past struggles and engaging with their contemporary legacies.

Roles:

- Provision of accessible public space as somewhere to meet and socialise
- Providing information/collections about local history and cultures
- Arranging events/activities for local community
- Offering the museum as a venue for local organisations and groups to meet
- Prioritising local tourism

Examples:

- In Sunderland, the Museum & Winter Gardens is a £10.5 million development in the city centre, which involved the refurbishment and extension of the museum and the erection of new Winter Gardens. In the first six months of reopening in 2002, visitor numbers rocketed to 460,000 - a five fold increase in popularity, attracting traditional and new users to a much loved landmark community space.

Provide a forum for public debate

The civic dimension of museums is as a public space where many things happen (debate, surprise, fun, deep feeling). This gives them the potential to address difficult issues in a thoughtful and non-threatening way. As civic space is diminished and much public debate is crude and polarised, this is a vital function

Roles:

- Displaying controversial/topical subjects
- Creating spaces and collection displays to encourage people to engage with each other in a constructive fashion
- Holding talks, lectures, debates, discussion groups on issues of current interest

Examples:

- Future Foods is an exhibition prepared by the Science Museum intended to provoke debate around genetic modification of crops. The museum also provides an online forum where the discussion can be continued after visiting, as well as hosting a debate in the museum itself, open to all visitors
- Displays on domestic violence in the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow

Promote social justice and human rights

Museums have a role in promoting the values of a fair and just society by actively aiming to enact beneficial social change rather than just assuming a position of neutrality. Museums can lead public thinking and develop a moral standpoint on human rights issues. Museums are places for debate, exchange and dialogue but the best also have a voice and something important to say. Some argue that should take political stances, although others think museums should be balanced or neutral.

Roles:

- Highlight injustices and point to ways in which they might be overcome
- Use their campaigns and programmes to help frame discussions on pressing issues of the day or lead on local campaigns.

Examples:

- The International Slavery Museum in Liverpool has a 'campaign zone', encouraging visitors to take up human rights causes, particularly in the fight against modern day slavery. The museum rejects the notion that museums should seek to be neutral and offers the alternative vision that museums can be positive forces for progress.
- The Museum of East Anglian Life has a 'museum activist' who makes sure the museum addresses issues that concern local people

Protect the natural environment

Some museums aim to actively improve the environment, through science and research, furthering our understanding of environmental issues and consequences, and by highlighting subjects such as extinction of species and climate change

Roles:

- Diverting people from consumption of goods and toward cultural and educational activity (it's better for the planet if you visit a museum instead of shopping for things you don't really need!)
- Showcasing how people live more environmentally friendly lives in different times and different parts of the world
- Hosting collections/talks, etc to inform and educate visitors about environmental challenges
- Actively attempt to shape values of visitors toward being environmentally friendly

Examples:

- Eden Project (in Cornwall) runs a Climate Revolution project which seeks to: encourage people to lower the environmental impact of their day-to-day lives, run sustainability courses to equip businesses with the tools and inspiration they need to get ahead in the low-carbon economy and works with comedians, artists and musicians to engage visitors on the subject of climate change, as well as seeking to minimise its own carbon footprint.
- During 2010, 24 schools took part in the Spring Bulbs for Schools project - a cross-Wales experiment that involves primary school students in exploring the impact of climate change on flowering times of bulbs, and encourages the development of science and IT-related skills. A total of 1,048 Communities First pupils took part and the project as a whole has involved 63 schools across Wales
- Killhope, The North of England Lead Mining Museum encourages visitors to be greener with: A 'green discount' of 10 per cent off admission for visitors who walk, cycle or use public transport; A 'lunch-box challenge' to get school groups to think about the resources and waste involved in their packed lunches ; A carbon-offset scheme so visitors who arrive by car can contribute to the cost of restoring local peatlands

Selected responses to obituary exercise:

- *The poor old museum died from lack of use and people not coming to visit him. No life inside led to the doors finally being shut. If only more visitors came to see him. People expected to attend the funeral are famous leaders, kings, queens and warriors from the ages, such as Gandhi, Tutankhamen, Queen Victoria and Richard III. The museum has lived through the ages and seen a lot and had so much to show to others. With no museums, people will have to use the internet to discover about our past but never get to see in real life and touch historical objects. David Cameron said "it's a sad time and looking to our past for learning and inspiration will become a lot harder."*

Cardiff

- *Last night the museums died. The cause of death was lack of breath due to people not attending which starved the building of oxygen. As the building lives on the attendance of people, it gave up and died. The funeral will be held on Sunday and all are invited. As reported the funeral of the last museum was held yesterday. Too few people attending was the reason for her death. There was a feeling of loss among those who attended the funeral. The Prime Minister has stated that a replacement must be found, and any ideas should be sent to the Department of Museums. He also said museum has the word 'use' in it and not being used caused the death of our great heritage.*

London

- *"Closed". That's what the sign said. No-one was interested. Why would that be. That was our past in there. Our present day. Charlie just asked who landed on the moon: how would we know. All records destroyed. At funerals you normally say gone but not forgotten. In this case the opposite, buried and lost. All our ancestry lost. Where did we come from? How do we know that the queen should be sitting on the throne: Where's the proof? Why do we need a newspaper it's tomorrow's chip paper. Not needed. Why read something that has no worth and will be forgotten? We no longer need these things. The museum is dead. And so is the past. All that knowledge wasted. Also the start of the end. It's a no go: The end is nigh.*

Glasgow

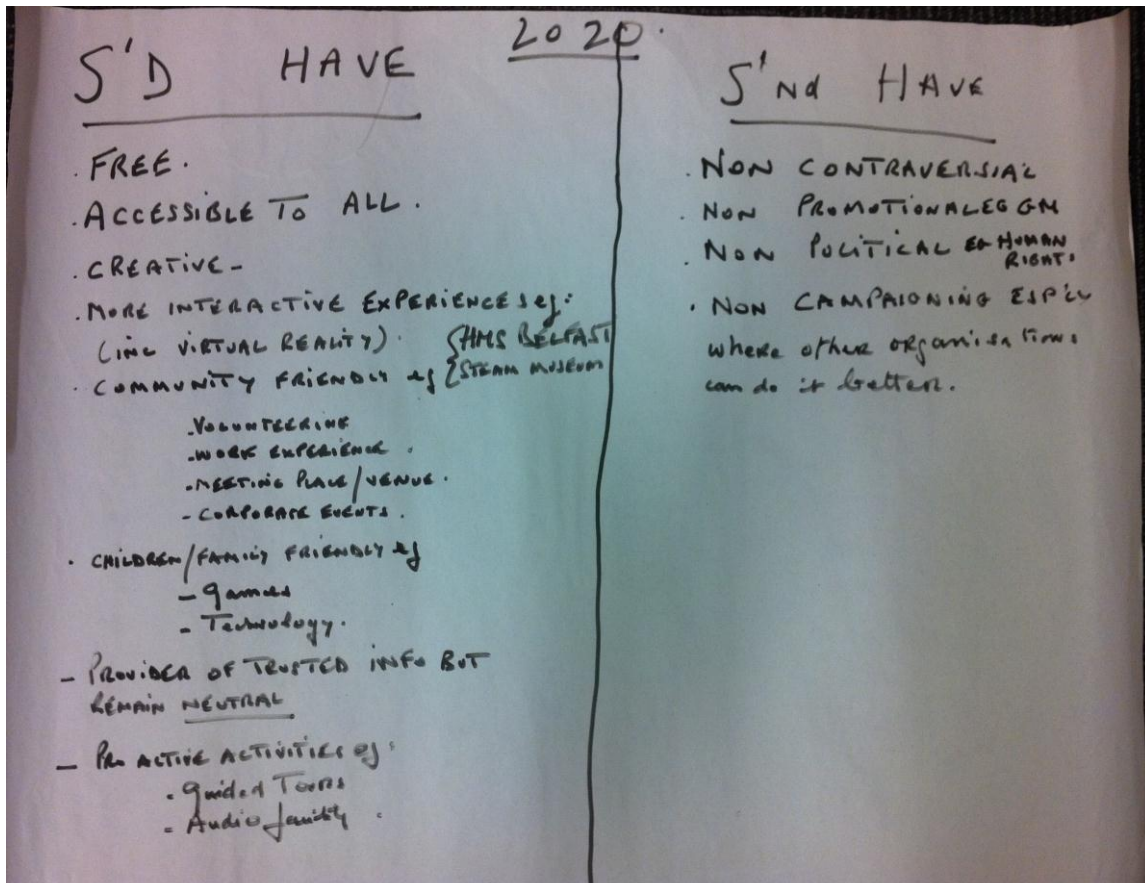
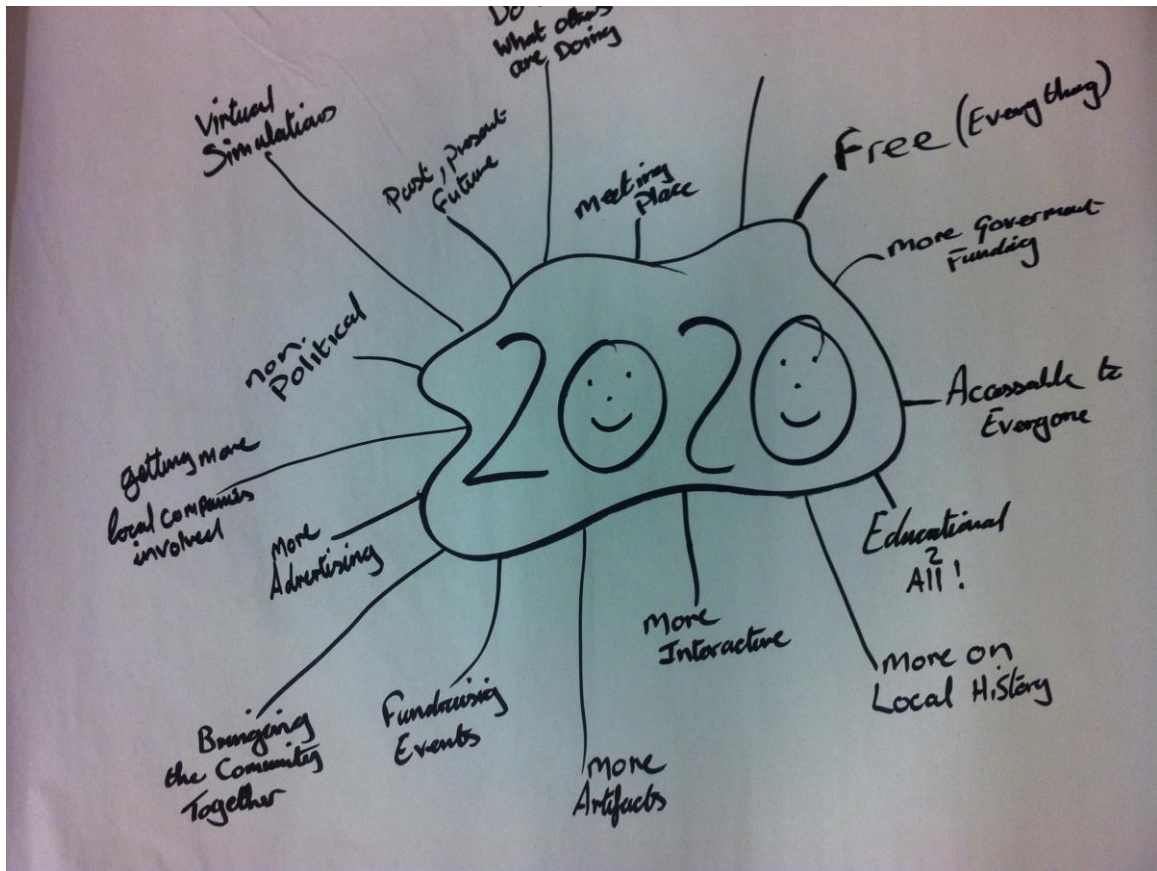
- *Did anyone spot the closure of all the museums? One minute they were there, the next gone. Did you leave it too late? Why did no-one say they were going and who let this happen? They were tired and boring so why should we care they have gone; after all it's all available online. Now ask yourself which is better electronic information or real life objects? Where else could you have gone to see and touch the past? Where will you go now? So I ask again, who cares?*

York

Selected initial collages:



Selected final posters:





Word cloud of spontaneous words associated with museums:

