

MUSEUMS
ASSOCIATION

JULY 2012

*DISCUSSION
PAPER
SUMMARY*

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MUSEUMS

A museum can be so much more than a building containing collections. In the Museums 2020 discussion paper, the Museums Association (MA) argues that every museum can do more to improve people's lives and play a bigger part in meeting society's needs. UK museums are transforming the ways they engage with people. Participation and attendance numbers are up, buildings are refurbished, collections are better used and cared for. Now, there is increasing interest in the impacts museums can have – the difference they can make.

The Museums 2020 discussion paper sets out the possibilities for museums and seeks your views about how museums could change to better fulfil their potential. 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. For most museums this will mean becoming more aware of what's going on around them, refreshing their role and purpose, focusing on the quality and depth of their engagement with people, constantly seeking out new opportunities, and building new partnerships with an ever-wider range of organisations.

Please read the paper, at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020, think about what it says, discuss it with colleagues and send us your views by **31 October 2012**. Please come to one of the free Museums 2020 workshops being held throughout the UK in September and October 2012.

Q1

LOOKING BACK OVER THE PAST YEAR OR SO, HOW HAS YOUR MUSEUM MADE THE GREATEST DIFFERENCE TO INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES, SOCIETY OR THE ENVIRONMENT?

Q2

OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS, HOW MIGHT YOUR MUSEUM BUILD ON THAT, AND USE ITS REPUTATION AND RESOURCES TO MAKE A GREATER IMPACT?

1

MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR INDIVIDUALS

Museums can improve individuals' lives by supporting learning, stimulating interaction with friends and family, building skills and confidence and boosting wellbeing

Museums allow people to spend quality time together. All museums know they are fundamentally there to stimulate thought and reflection and support learning. And surely all museums also recognise they should be inclusive, engaging with ever broader audiences. Many museums go much further: building individuals' skills, providing a safe, supportive environment in which vulnerable people can build their confidence, and serving people with health needs. There is growing interest in the contribution museums can make to people's wellbeing, a term used in varied ways. "Wellbeing" can specifically refer to mental health, to health in general, or to a more general sense of quality of life and happiness.

Q3

OVER THE NEXT FIVE TO 10 YEARS, HOW CAN YOUR MUSEUM MAKE A GREATER DIFFERENCE TO INDIVIDUALS?

Q4

HOW COULD YOU BUILD IDEAS OF HAPPINESS, HEALTH AND WELLBEING INTO WHAT YOU DO IN YOUR MUSEUM?

IMPACT

Q5

*HOW CAN YOUR MUSEUM
BECOME CLOSER TO ITS
COMMUNITIES OVER THE
NEXT FIVE TO 10 YEARS?*

Q6

*HOW COULD YOU BETTER
INVOLVE PEOPLE AS
PARTICIPANTS IN YOUR
MUSEUM'S DISPLAYS,
EXHIBITIONS, PROGRAMMES
AND DECISION-MAKING?*

2 MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR COMMUNITIES

Museums can strengthen communities by bringing people together, validating the experiences of particular groups, supporting community organisations and seeking ways to increase community participation

Museums enhance understanding within and between communities, bringing people and groups together, and can help define local distinctiveness. They connect to their communities by offering opportunities to volunteer. Many museums work with other organisations in interdependent relationships to help strengthen

communities. However, most museums have more potential to become truly *of* their communities. Many groups remain unrepresented in museums' main displays and collections; some groups are less likely to engage with museums than others; and the workforce seems resistant to diversification.

"Participation" is useful shorthand for opening up museums to a range of voices. At its most developed level, a range of people participate in making decisions.

Some museums collaborate with international "communities of origin". Participation can transform communities and individuals from occasionally consulted consumers of museum-created product to active participants.

*MUSEUMS
COULD TAKE
GREATER RISKS.*

3

MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR SOCIETY

Museums develop collections, create knowledge and contribute to cultural life. They can promote public debate and beneficial social change

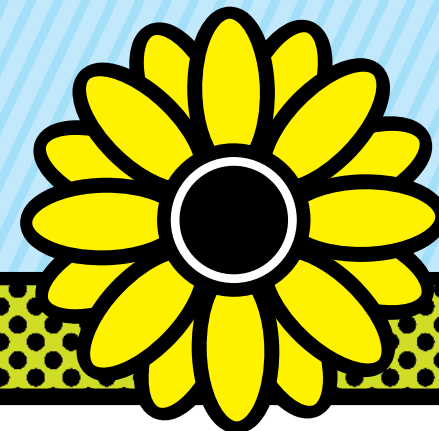
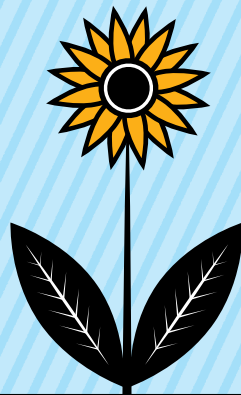
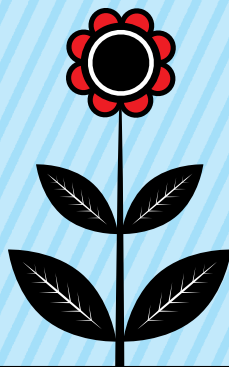
Museums stimulate wide appreciation of both familiar and lesser-known aspects of art, history, science and, increasingly, life today. They can help people think about the future. Digitisation has substantially improved the availability of collections information, but most museums have a long way to go to provide straightforward access to their collections. Museums could take greater risks and balance possible damage against the benefits that come from making things more easily available. The potential of loans between museums (and with other venues) is largely unrealised. As well as creating and holding collections, museums create, hold and share knowledge for society. Increasingly, the boundaries are dissolving between knowledge created within the organisation and other knowledge and expertise. Some pioneering museums are explicitly "activist", aiming to use their position as trusted organisations to bring about socially beneficial change.

Q7

*HOW CAN YOUR MUSEUM
BETTER USE AND DEVELOP
ITS COLLECTION AND THE
CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE
TO INCREASE ITS
CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY
AND TO CULTURAL LIFE?*

Q8

*WHAT POTENTIAL IS
THERE FOR YOUR MUSEUM
TO PROMOTE HUMAN
RIGHTS, EQUALITY AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE?*



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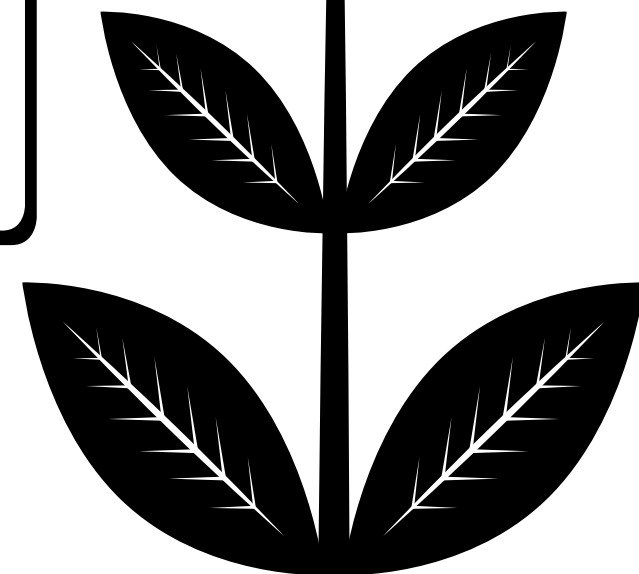
MAKING A DIFFERENCE TO THE ENVIRONMENT

Museums can aim to care for their locality and their environment, as well as for collections. They can help people think about more sustainable ways of living

Museums' careful stewardship of collections hasn't often extended into explicitly caring about the natural environment. Some museum activity can be environmentally harmful, such as air conditioning. The biggest area of museum energy use is probably visitor travel. There is a growing literature that argues in favour of museums focusing more on a local audience and less on tourists. Museums could help people make the transition to a better future by showcasing alternative ways of living and thinking beyond the day-to-day. Many models of a more sustainable future see an increased role for organisations such as museums. In any less consumerist society, there is likely to be increased demand for worthwhile experiences and "meaning making".

Q9

*HOW CAN YOUR MUSEUM
SUPPORT THE PROTECTION
OF THE NATURAL
ENVIRONMENT, OR PROMOTE
WAYS OF LIVING THAT ARE
LESS DAMAGING TO THE
ENVIRONMENT?*



IMPLICATIONS

Increasing impact implies more focus on activity and programming, with less unchanging "permanent" displays

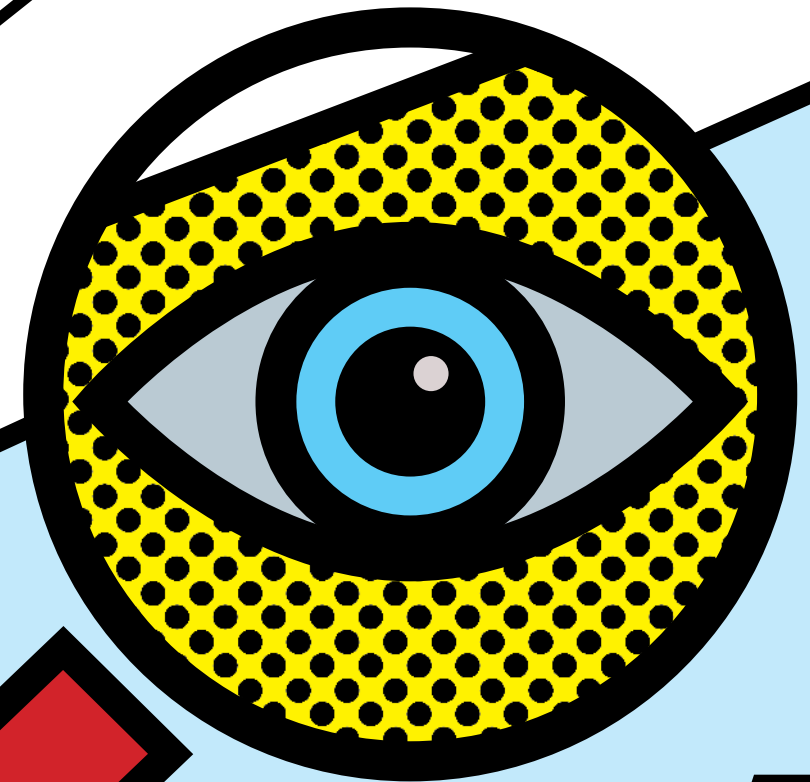
The emerging themes in museum activity – themes that will grow as we head towards 2020 – are wellbeing, participation and social change. These require museums to respond to public interests and imply more of a focus on programmes, events and ways of working and perhaps less emphasis on stores, refurbished buildings and permanent displays.

"Permanent" display spaces tend to offer little beyond learning largely pre-determined things. Museums could rethink the ways they allocate their space, with more available flexibly for a wider range of activities: for workshops, for short-term pop-up displays, for performances, for discussions. Museum buildings and sites are a great public asset, but to reach wider audiences, museums will expand the work they do offsite and virtually. Sustained, long-term work with a marginalised group might have greater impact than less intense work with greater numbers.

Q10

HOW WILL YOUR MUSEUM MAKE A GREATER DIFFERENCE TO INDIVIDUALS, COMMUNITIES, SOCIETY AND THE ENVIRONMENT? SHOULD THERE BE LESS EMPHASIS ON ATTRACTING INCREASING NUMBERS OF VISITORS TO PERMANENT DISPLAYS?

MUSEUMS COULD RETHINK THE WAYS THEY ALLOCATE THEIR SPACE, WITH MORE AVAILABLE FLEXIBLY FOR A WIDER RANGE OF ACTIVITIES



IMPLEMENTATION



MUSEUMS WILL HAVE
LOWER FIXED OPERATING
COSTS AND MORE RESOURCES
AVAILABLE TO RESPOND TO
CHANGING AUDIENCE NEEDS
AND INTERESTS.

*People who work for museums
will need to work differently and
develop new skills. Museums need
to reduce their fixed costs*

The MA's vision is that museums in 2020 will be responsive and socially engaged; they will include many more voices, will share responsibility in varied partnerships, will house increasingly varied activities and will change constantly. People who work for museums will be entrepreneurial, creative and collaborative. Museums will have lower fixed operating costs and more resources available to respond to changing audience needs and interests. With perhaps more of an arts or community-work mindset, funding will increasingly support activity. Within a general expectation of increased impact, and high quality engagement with wide audiences, funders and policy-makers will need to recognise that every museum is different.

Each museum - and each individual who works for museums - has a choice about what to do. Your museum might be more comfortable with the language of wellbeing, health and happiness; with that of participation and co-production; with that of rights, equality and justice; or with that of environmentalism and transition.

All of these mean choosing to make a far greater difference to individuals, communities, society and the environment.

Q11

*IN 2020, IF THINGS GO WELL,
WHICH TWO OR THREE
IMPACTS SHOULD BE THE
MAIN FOCUS OF THE WORK
OF YOUR MUSEUM?*

Q12

*WHAT COULD BE THE MAIN
BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING
THOSE IMPACTS? HOW WILL
PEOPLE WHO WORK FOR
YOUR MUSEUM, AND ITS
FUNDERS, NEED TO THINK
AND ACT DIFFERENTLY?*

ANSWER at www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 or email your thoughts to museums2020@museumsassociation.org. Please respond by 31 October 2012.

*THIS IS A SUMMARY OF
THE FULL MUSEUMS 2020
DISCUSSION PAPER.
READ IT AT
[WWW.MUSEUMSASSOCIATION.
ORG/MUSEUMS2020](http://WWW.MUSEUMSASSOCIATION.ORG/MUSEUMS2020)*

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