MUSEUMS CHANGE LIVES

THE MA'S VISION FOR THE IMPACT OF MUSEUMS

MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION

MUSEUMS CHANGE PEOPLE'S LIVES. THEY ENRICH THE LIVES OF INDIVIDUALS, CONTRIBUTE TO STRONG AND RESILIENT COMMUNITIES, AND HELP CREATE A FAIR AND JUST SOCIETY. MUSEUMS IN TURN ARE IMMENSELY ENRICHED BY THE SKILLS AND CREATIVITY OF THEIR PUBLIC.

MUSEUMS CHANGE LIVES IS THE MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION'S VISION FOR THE INCREASED SOCIAL IMPACT OF MUSEUMS. IT DEMONSTRATES THAT MUSEUMS CAN BE AMBITIOUS ABOUT THEIR ROLE IN SOCIETY. ALL MUSEUMS, HOWEVER THEY ARE FUNDED AND WHATEVER THEIR SUBJECT MATTER, CAN SUPPORT POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE. SOME MUSEUMS ALREADY PAY GREAT ATTENTION TO THIS; OTHERS HAVE AS YET UNTAPPED POTENTIAL.

The time is right for museums to transform their contribution to contemporary life. As public expenditure continues to be cut, it is more important than ever to have a strong sense of social purpose. Funders and policy makers expect museums to achieve greater social outcomes and impact. Individuals and communities are under stress and every museum must play its part in improving lives, creating better places and helping to advance society, building on the traditional role of preserving collections and connecting audiences with them.

Museums Change Lives aims to enthuse people in museums to increase their impact, encourage funders to support museums in becoming more relevant to their audiences and communities, and show organisations the potential partnerships they could have with museums, to change people's lives.

MUSEUMS CHANGE LIVES HIGHLIGHTS THESE PRINCIPLES:

- Every museum is different, but all can find ways of maximising their social impact.
- Everyone has the right to meaningful participation in the life and work of museums.
- Audiences are creators as well as consumers of knowledge; their insights and expertise enrich and transform the museum experience for others.
- Active public participation changes museums for the better.
- Museums foster questioning, debate and critical thinking.
- Good museums offer excellent experiences that meet public needs.
- Effective museums engage with contemporary issues.
- Social justice is at the heart of the impact of museums.
- Museums are not neutral spaces.
- Museums are rooted in places and contribute to local distinctiveness.

BACKGROUND

Museums Change Lives follows on from earlier work by the Museums Association to encourage change in museums. In the 1990s, we championed the role of museums in learning and stressed the importance of access for all. In the 2000s, we led a movement to get collections better used and better understood. Throughout, and working with many other organisations, we helped equip museums and their staff with skills, knowledge and ideas.

In 2012, the Museums Association decided it was time to look afresh at the role of museums and respond to changing contexts. At national level, devolution is changing policy towards museums, with museum strategies in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland; in England, changes come from the coalition government and Arts Council England's new responsibilities for museums. Cuts in public spending mean jobs are being slashed and services curtailed.

We launched Museums 2020 to look at the future of museums and their impact.

Our Museums 2020 discussion paper focused on the growing interest in how museums support positive social change. It drew on a wealth of writing and research to explore the ways museums impact on individuals, communities, society and the environment. It set out the powerful ways some museums are making a difference to people's lives.

We stimulated professional debate, commissioned pioneering research into what the public thinks and spoke with charities and social enterprises that work with museums. Ideas and questions raised in Museums 2020 featured regularly in Museums Journal and on the Museums Association website. Hundreds of people gave their views in response to the discussion paper, at workshops and conference sessions, in online discussions, at public deliberative workshops and at specialist roundtables.

Museums Change Lives is built on that rich range of research and discussion.

Museums of all types have changed. Investment from national and local governments, the lottery, private donations, trusts and foundations has transformed museum buildings, displays and activities. Museums and audiences are engaging more closely together. This is enabling museums to make far better use of collections and other resources to meet more people's interests and needs.

People are responding. Museums are highly trusted[1] and audiences are increasing – in England, over half the adult population visited a museum in 2012, the highest since records began.[2]

Museums have long improved lives by stimulating inspiration, learning and enjoyment. The best museums are now striving to realise their full potential for society and are far more than just buildings and collections. They have two-way relationships with communities, drawing on a wide range of skills, knowledge, experience and networks. They are becoming increasingly outward looking, building more relationships with partners. They are welcoming more people as active participants.

Reflecting a desire for enriched and healthier lives, more resilient communities and a more just society, Museums Change Lives explores museum impacts under three headings:

MUSEUMS ENHANCE WELLBEING P6
looks at the ways museums make a difference to individuals;

MUSEUMS CREATE BETTER PLACES P8
encompasses museums' contribution to communities and the environment;

MUSEUMS INSPIRE PEOPLE AND IDEAS P10
includes impacts on learning and contemporary thought.

Finally, Over to you suggests
PRACTICAL ACTIONS FOR MUSEUMS P15

There is an accompanying Museums Change Lives web resource **www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives**

1 Public Perceptions of – and attitudes to – the purposes of museums in society. A report prepared by Britain Thinks for the Museums Association, 2013. http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums2020 All subsequent references to public attitudes are from this source

2 DCMS Taking Part survey data 2012/13 quarter 3

MUSEUMS ENHANCE WELLBEING

Museums boost people's quality of life and improve mental and physical health. It is good for wellbeing to engage closely with collections and ideas in the presence of other people.

Everyone is entitled to an excellent museum experience that meets their needs. The best museums embody the concept of social justice by being accessible to all and offering a supportive environment for everyone, whatever their backgrounds and needs. They help improve the lives of unemployed and homeless people, isolated older people, and looked-after children. They are increasingly finding targeted ways to serve people with health needs, such as those with dementia or in hospitals or care homes. As the population ages, museums can do more to help improve the quality of older people's lives.

The House of Memories is centred on the objects, archives and stories at the Museum of Liverpool, and uses music, dance, conversation and atmosphere to increase impact. In partnership with training provider AFTA Thought, the programme provides social care staff with skills and resources to inform their practice and to use collections to provide a stimulating and rewarding experience for people living with dementia. Alistair Burns, Department of Health national clinical director for dementia, said, 'House of Memories is making a real difference to health and social care staff and the people with dementia they care for.'

Working in partnership with other organisations, museums can help people build their skills, confidence and self-esteem. They can enable people to increase their employability, help widen access to higher education and encourage young people to consider socially beneficial careers, such as science. They can help disaffected people and those from marginalised sections of the community gain a sense of citizenship and belonging to society and broaden horizons, which can otherwise seem narrow and uninviting.

Colchester and Ipswich Museums collaborated with a range of partners to engage with people who had experienced homelessness. They created a 'bedsit garden' outside Hollytrees Museum in Castle Park, a place where many homeless people spend time and have slept rough; the museum collected and displayed objects important to homeless people; and artists led a range of creative activities. Sarah, a participant in a creative project, commented, 'Now I am doing night classes, it has given me the confidence to want to do other things.' Katie, another participant, said, 'It had a huge impact on me. I felt quite strong.' Beacon House, one of the partner organisations, said, 'We were surprised at how seriously the clients took the project; every year a handful of them turn their lives around and displays like this show that they are people with feelings and backgrounds, not just invisible.'

There is, of course, a moral and ethical argument for work to increase individual wellbeing – so that every citizen benefits from museums – but there is also an economic argument: social problems create high costs for society and it will make a difference if museums play even a small part in reducing them.

The Tank Museum offered opportunities for young offenders with community punishment orders in a three-way partnership with Weymouth College and Dorset Community Service Unit. By cleaning and conserving vehicles in the museum's collection, individuals could achieve engineering and basic skills qualifications.

An increasing range of people are participating in the work of museums, contributing their skills, experience, knowledge and time, enabling them to be active citizens and to change their museums for the better. By participating and volunteering, people connect with others and give something back. For some, museum volunteering has been life changing, giving them a sense of purpose.

"EVERYONE IS ENTITLED TO AN EXCELLENT MUSEUM EXPERIENCE THAT MEETS THEIR NEEDS"

Research into attitudes to museums shows there is a strong public belief that museums should be accessible to all – the essence of social justice. Museums have a duty to be inclusive – to see their audience as everyone and to engage with the widest possible range of people, constantly seeking out new audiences. The best museum displays are both scholarly and popular, meeting the needs of people of all ages and experience, from novices to experts, and the needs of people with disabilities. Many achieve this, but many could be far more accessible. There is huge potential for museums to reach wider audiences by looking beyond their buildings physically and digitally, and experimenting with new forms of engagement.

MUSEUMS CREATE BETTER PLACES

Museums are one of the things that make a place worth living in and worth visiting. They help define a place – a city, a town, a village, sometimes a nation.

Museums are rooted in places; they help shape and convey a sense of identity and contribute to local distinctiveness, counterbalancing the effects of globalisation. The best museums work with communities to collect and represent a place's diverse and collective history and heritage. They see it as a fundamental right of citizens to connect to their inheritance. The collections held by museums and the knowledge and skills of their staff are but a small part of the cultural resources and expertise in an area. The best museums recognise this and enable their audiences to benefit from wider assets beyond the museum itself.

Glasgow's Curious project involved 100 people from a wide range of community groups in selecting and interpreting objects from Glasgow Museums' collection for an exhibition at St Mungo's Museum. An exhibition visitor said, 'The fact it's been put together by ordinary people, on the same level as you and me, makes it much easier to understand and appreciate.' Curious had an impact on many areas of the museum's work including enhancing documentation, diversifying volunteering and increasing involvement with teachers of English as a second language.

Museums and their collections belong to everyone. Some people already have a strong sense of ownership of their museum, but the population shifts of recent decades mean that people are increasingly from a cultural background not reflected in the museum's core collections. The best museums are addressing this by bringing in communities and individuals as equal partners to shape the future of the museum. Active public participation in decision-making changes museums for the better.

Extensive public engagement is shaping the St Fagans National History Museum redevelopment. Participatory forums that represent different key audience groups work with the museum to develop gallery content and learning programmes and influence architectural and gallery design. Lee Kabza of the Caerphilly Youth Forum said, 'Young people have really enjoyed working alongside the design team and the architects over the last two years. What an opportunity they have had. The process has raised their aspirations. Some are even thinking of going into design as a career now.'

Generating understanding between different groups and cultures will be one of the future's biggest challenges and museums have a critical role to play. They can illustrate varied lives, experiences and beliefs, helping people to learn about and understand each other, stimulating empathy.

Luton Culture worked with young people from Luton's diverse communities to transform a Vauxhall Bedford truck into the style of decorated trucks in Pakistan. The Truck Art project celebrated the links between Luton and Pakistan: Bedford trucks manufactured in Luton in the 1950s are still used in Pakistan. The project included two international exchanges between Haider Ali, a Pakistani truck artist and Rory Coxhill, a British Gypsy artisan. Six members of Luton Museums' youth team visited Lahore and Karachi. One of them, Chris McCarthy, said, 'I can say that it has helped develop myself at a personal level and I have made new friends wherever the project has taken me. I have learnt a lot about a different culture which has helped me understand new things about my own culture.'

The best museums put themselves at the heart of their communities; they understand how they can improve the area and the lives of people who live there. They work with others in interdependent and mutually beneficial relationships, building partnerships with charities, community groups, children's centres, schools, libraries, arts organisations, social services, the NHS and local authorities. Museums strive to be good neighbours and see themselves as community hubs. They share spaces, skills and resources with other community organisations that are often smaller and less well established, and in turn are open to learn from the skills and expertise of their partners.

The Oriental Museum provides a venue for Durham Chinese School, which offers Chinese language classes from infants to A Level. The school acts as a cultural and social hub for Chinese and China-related community activities. Head teacher Mamtimyn Sunuodula says, 'The rich Chinese cultural artefacts displayed at the museum and the inspiring cultural activities it organises for young learners have been extremely important for enhancing our students' cultural and linguistic education. It helps us to relate the past with the present, China with Britain, and develop the intercultural competence and pluralistic worldview of our students.'

"ACTIVE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CHANGES MUSEUMS FOR THE BETTER"

Museums have long cared for collections; the most forward-looking are considering how they can also care for people and places by contributing to community resilience. The best museums are thoughtful about how they enhance an area's economic vitality and contribute to social and economic regeneration. They source products and services locally. They help prepare people for work. They encourage tourists and other visitors to patronise local businesses, generating local economic activity and supporting local jobs.

In the face of economic and environmental threats, the best museums encourage people to look forward positively, reflecting on lessons from the past to envision new ways of living in the future. Collections contain evidence about past environments and can suggest creative solutions for society's future.

The Garden Museum's Floriculture exhibition explored the history of the flower trade and drew attention to current concerns about the environmental and social impact of the international trade in cut flowers. With community groups, the museum developed a cutting garden to supply locally grown cut flowers.

Museums are well placed to promote conserving, repairing and re-using things. They can improve their area's environment by collaborating with organisations such as transition towns to show people that there is more to life than shopping and material consumption. Museums have the potential to thrive in a less consumerist society, where there is likely to be increased public demand for worthwhile experiences.

MUSEUMS INSPIRE PEOPLE AND IDEAS

Research into public attitudes to museums shows people see museums as places of stimulating ideas, where learning is active.

People see museums as fundamentally about learning for all. From supporting schoolchildren's education, to motivating adults to discover more about history, art, science and life today, museums inspire a passion for knowledge and a lifelong love of learning. Museums facilitate discovery, share knowledge and inspire thought. They put people into a receptive frame of mind and foster questioning, debate and critical thinking. They stimulate contemplation, curiosity and creativity. They nurture and support artists, help preserve traditional craft skills and encourage people to make things.

The Museum of the Manchester Regiment supports Stitch in Time, a sewing circle for men and women that meets at the museum twice a month. The group organised an exhibition, using their skills and the collection as inspiration to design their own 'Colour for Tameside' embroideries, based on the museum's collection of regimental colours or flags. Jean Goodall said, 'This group has enhanced my life in several ways. I have done lots of craftwork all my life and now, being older, I find that I have more patience to produce a good piece of work. When our work was finished, the museum produced a wonderful display. There are some people who have been ill and were trying to get back into society and each of them said that they felt they were better for joining.'

Research shows that people trust museums highly (at a time when there is distrust in government, media and business) and regard them as authoritative, expecting them to provide reliable information. However, museums are not neutral; the politics of the past and present shape collections, information and interpretation. The public expectation that museums are unbiased brings with it a great responsibility. It means trying to be as honest as possible. This is exemplified by museums' work to include more voices and experiences, to offer interpretations from multiple points of view, and to reveal 'hidden histories' – such as histories of slavery, of homosexuality, or of disability.

The best museums use their position of trust to encourage people to reflect on society's contemporary challenges. They promote social justice and human rights, challenge prejudice and champion fairness and equality.

Kutmaan, an exhibition at Leighton House Museum, explored the plight of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people who have been forced into exile because of their sexuality or gender identity. Most of the men portrayed were Iraqis or Iranians, many of them photographed in Syria or Turkey, where, says photographer Bradley Secker, they were 'displaced from their country, their family and their friends.'

Museums can present collections in ways that challenge assumptions and stimulate people to think about the world today and how it might be different in the future.

The British Museum lent the Cyrus Cylinder to museums in the USA, in part to highlight its message of respect for diversity, tolerance and universal human rights. The cylinder is often referred to as the first bill of human rights as it appears to encourage freedom of worship throughout the Persian Empire and to allow deported people to return to their homelands.

Effective museums highlight areas of concern such as discrimination, poverty and climate change, engage people in considering ethical issues in contemporary science and use art to prompt thought about the state of the world. People prefer museums to present them with a variety of views on contentious subjects and to allow them to reach their own conclusions. This gives museums an opportunity to stimulate thoughtful discussion and dialogue.

"MUSEUMS FOSTER QUESTIONING, DEBATE AND CRITICAL THINKING"

Museums share knowledge, link specialists with a wide audience, and showcase new research. The boundaries are dissolving between knowledge created within the museum and elsewhere. Museums bring together research from varied places, including university academics and, increasingly, community groups. They draw on the expertise of 'source communities', the people who made or used things now in museums.

Pitt Rivers Museum staff took Blackfoot shirts, collected in 1841, home to Canada for a visit so that Blackfoot people could handle them, learn from them, strengthen knowledge about them and revive traditional rituals. The museum learnt many new things about the shirts from the partnership. A Blackfoot participant said, 'It was like a life-changing event [that] made me want to further my education, and to research First Nations archives.'

Increasingly, audiences are creators of knowledge. Many people want to contribute, to connect with others, to express and share their knowledge, experiences, opinions, ideas and creations – to have a more personal experience and the opportunity to do more than consume museum-created products.

Museums will increasingly act as facilitators, opening up interpretation with user-generated content, respecting people as participants, able to engage actively in ways that meet their own needs, actively shaping what museums do and shaping what they get from museums. This will further increase the deep sense of ownership and attachment people have for museums.

The UK's museums use, understand and care for their collections better than ever before. More and more people value them as places of learning, inspiration and enjoyment. Buildings are restored, displays are improved. Of course there is always more to do – one more piece of interpretation to add, one more person to reach, one more piece of information to discover, one more item to collect. That work will continue.

MUSEUMS CHANGE LIVES

Now it is time for museums to raise their ambitions. The Museums Association believes that every museum should commit to improving its impact on society. Every museum can play a part, however small, in improving health and wellbeing, helping to create better places and championing a fairer and more just society. Every museum should have the ambition to change people's lives.

Transforming a museum to improve its impact sustainably will need a strong sense of purpose, clear organisational values and steadfast commitment from all levels of the organisation. It means moving on from a general sense that the museum provides public benefit to identifying precisely how it will best make a defined and explicit contribution: to decide what it is going to do to support positive social change. Above all, this is about an attitude of mind: a clear commitment to address the needs of individuals, communities, society and the environment.

There are inspiring examples of museums that have made that commitment. Every museum is different and there is no 'one size fits all' solution, but all can find ways of maximising their social impact. Each museum will find its own approach, based on the needs of its publics, its context and its collection and other assets.

Museums will be flexible and responsive, regularly changing displays and exhibitions to meet changing interests and demands and offering activities, programmes and events to meet a wide range of needs and interests. Organisations and individuals will be outward-looking and open-minded in working with others, will devolve power and will welcome participation.

Everyone working for museums can contribute. It's time for your museum to respond to hard times by making a bigger difference. It's time for you to play your part in helping museums change people's lives.

"EVERY MUSEUM SHOULD HAVE THE AMBITION TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S LIVES; EVERY MUSEUM IS DIFFERENT, BUT ALL CAN FIND WAYS OF MAXIMISING THEIR SOCIAL IMPACT"

COMMITMENT
PARTICIPATION
CELEBRATE
LEARN
LONG-TERM
RESOURCES
CONNECT
REFLECT
INNOVATE
LISTEN
INVOLVE
PARTNERS
EQUALS
MUSEUMS
CHANGE
LIVES
RESEARCH
REVIEW
TAKE RISKS

OVER TO YOU

HERE ARE TEN ACTIONS THAT WILL HELP YOUR MUSEUM IMPROVE ITS SOCIAL IMPACT...

1. Make a clear **COMMITMENT** to improve your museum's social impact. Regard it as core business. Museums already make decisions in terms of decades about their collections and buildings; have long-term strategic goals for your impact, too.

2. **REFLECT** on your current impacts. **LISTEN** to users and non-users. Research local needs. **INVOLVE** all your staff, and your supporters, in thinking about whose needs you could serve better. Think carefully about where your museum is likely to have the most useful impact. Smaller museums will need to be selective; larger museums will want to aim to achieve a wide range of impacts.

3. **RESEARCH** what other museums are doing to have a beneficial impact. There's lots of information out there – for a start, the Museums Change Lives web resource, Museums Journal, Museum Practice and the MA Annual Conference.

4. Seek out and **CONNECT** with suitable **PARTNERS**. For most museums these are likely to be local charities, social enterprises or public-sector organisations dedicated to having a beneficial social impact. There may be people in local universities with similar aims. Don't be surprised if potential partners haven't previously considered working with museums. Be ready to convince them that your museum can support their agendas and help them achieve their aims.

5. Devise practical proposals, working with your partners as **EQUALS**. Be clear about your shared objectives. Make the most out of your expertise in culture, collections and learning and their expertise in social impact.

6. Allocate **RESOURCES**. You might need to work with your partners to fundraise, but some things can start small from existing resources. There are funding opportunities in commissioning by public bodies, from trusts and foundations, from public and lottery sources.

7. **REVIEW** your practices and procedures so you can meet the needs of your partners and of the people you aim to reach. Avoid preciousness about professionalism or collections. **INNOVATE** and be willing to **TAKE RISKS**: balance the benefits that come from using and sharing the collection with the small risk of damage.

8. Reflect on your work. **LEARN** from and with partners and participants. Consider the benefits of evaluating and measuring your impacts. Tell other museums and other potential partners about what you've done and what you've learnt. **CELEBRATE** it, as you would a new exhibition. Use it as an opportunity to advocate your museum's value.

9. Find ways for participants and partners to have a deep impact on your museum. Encourage wider **PARTICIPATION** in all aspects of your work: bring more voices into interpretation and devolve power. Encourage people to contribute to decision making about what to do, what to display and what issues to address.

10. Strive for **LONG-TERM** sustained change based on lasting relationships with partners and long-term engagement with participants, maintained beyond time-limited work and one-off projects.

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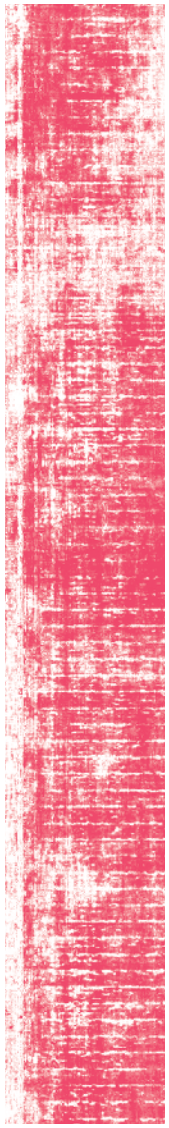
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