Stakeholder perceptions of - and attitudes to - the purposes of museums in society
A report prepared by BritainThinks for Museums Association
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1. Introduction and context

BritainThinks conducted a series of deliberative workshops with members of the public to explore their views on the purposes of museums and their role in society, in February and March 2013.

The Museums Association subsequently wished to further develop the work and complement it with the professional’s point of view by sharing the insights obtained with a range of stakeholders and engaging them in a discussion about the purposes and roles of museums in meeting society’s needs in the future.

A workshop with 10 professionals in key sectors that have a stake in the purposes and roles of museums, was held in Central London on Tuesday 9th April, and included representatives from the following organisations:

- Make Justice Work; Canterbury Christ Church University; Vintage Vision; RNIB; nef; Grandparents Plus; Alzheimers Society; Flow Associates; Global Action Plan

The format of the workshop was structured but informal and consisted of an open discussion to understand: firstly, the purposes and roles of museums from the professional standpoint, in light of the public’s views, using output from the public deliberations as input for debate; secondly, the workshop created a forum for looking at the future agenda of museums.

The workshop also provided an opportunity for members of the Museums Association to join the discussion and engage directly with a range of stakeholders in a frank conversation about the key challenges facing their sectors and the potential role of museums in addressing these challenges.

This report looks to build on the findings from the deliberative research in terms of how museums can deliver on their public roles and with regards to partnerships and outreach programmes. It also aims to provide more understanding of the priorities of museums in terms of public funding, how these priorities could be implemented, the barriers and challenges to this, and how stakeholders prioritise ambitions.

This report is to be read in conjunction with BritainThinks’ Public Attitudes Report and the Museums Association ‘Museums 2020’ report.
2. Reactions to Museums 2020

Stakeholders were given an overview of the Museums 2020 Strategy document by Maurice Davies, Head of Policy and Communication at the Museums Association, and invited to share their views on it.

The content of the presentation came across as aspirational and ambitious, although there was some surprise expressed at the level of ambition.

“The impacts identified here are fantastic aspirations”

Many stakeholders considered museums professionals to be unusually risk averse and protective, with a real opportunity for museums to ‘open up’ more to make them more inclusive and welcoming. If collections are the ‘way in’ to museums, then the barriers to accessing them need to be broken down.

“One thing that’s always seemed to me frustrating ... Museums ... are fortress-like ... you have to go there to see the stuff ... There are terrific opportunities to take advantage of new technology to make the content of these great collections more accessible ... museums have not taken advantage of that”

Digital technology can increase accessibility, both in terms of reach and engagement, and by showing that museums are open to feedback and questions. Museums need to become ‘porous’, opening themselves up to visitors and stakeholders. Educators need to be part of this process of applying content in creative ways using digital platforms.

“The difference between the experience of the real thing and the experience of the virtual thing is narrowing ... more imagination, more creativity and more daring is needed in exploiting those possibilities”

Ensuring museums are accessible for all is also considered essential with the need to be imaginative about how to create great experiences for people with additional needs. Be that the creation of audio descriptions and stories of collections, or helping break down the emotional barriers for those unfamiliar with museums who may find it ‘stressful’ or ‘daunting’.

“If it is the case that some people are actually physically alarmed and stressed when approaching a museum, we need to think about the implications of that”
An example of museums being ‘stuffy’, is that of the tweeting character @HornimanWalrus which was created by a member of the public around the ‘overstuffed’ walrus exhibit at the Horniman Museum. This is seen as an amusing and creative way of potentially reaching out and challenging preconceptions about museums, while the museum itself allegedly remains ‘defensive and frosty’ about it.

A number of stakeholders had experienced some great examples of imagination and creativity, for example training museum staff to talk about and share information differently to enable better connection with visitors, and they wanted to see more of this type of work.

Stakeholders were very positive about museums broadening their core purposes, although it is important to explain why and to reach out to build partnerships. Museums have core skills and expertise that should be used to complement the skills and expertise of other organisations, by pooling resources and better understanding the issues at hand - and responding to them.

They also agreed on maintaining collections as being the focus of what museums are for and that other activities should provide relevant added value to this.
“Museums should allow new activities, but they mustn’t lose sight of collections as the central thing they do ... you tend to get a split between people [working in museums] who are focussed on posterity and those on the immediate needs of young people, for example”
3. Reactions to Public Attitudes Research

Stakeholders were given an overview of BritainThinks Public Attitudes research findings by Viki Cooke, Founding Director of BritainThinks, and invited to share their views on it.

Stakeholders were initially surprised that the public challenged some of the suggested purposes. However, as the discussion evolved it became clear that stakeholders themselves prioritised the same essential purposes as the public, namely the care and preservation of heritage, holding collections and mounting displays and creating knowledge for, and about, society.

In terms of targeting niche audiences, stakeholders thought that framing communications and activities carefully is essential - language, positioning, impact and reasoning are crucial. An interesting comparison was the education sector and the debate about special schools versus incorporating those with special needs into mainstream schools.

“In trying to make an inclusive environment, you’re going to have to work with a range of individual groups to try and make that balance, so it doesn’t look like you’re working with segregated groups all the time … that happens in schools as well”

Stakeholders believed that museums’ role in supporting vulnerable groups was to be accessible and welcoming, catering for different needs within the physical environment. Museums can most effectively act as partners to experts working with vulnerable people; the primary role of museums in targeting niche audiences should be that of empowering certain groups by opening up access into museums. Stakeholders agreed with the public sentiment that it is more appropriate for museums to work in partnership with other organisations to make more effective use of museum space, rather than museums “going out and doing it themselves”.

“The direction of museums’ outreach work is … working with vulnerable people or disadvantaged people … to overcome their barriers … and develop the benefits of access … it’s not necessarily direct intervention in their lives”

“Directors of museums can be reticent to open things up, for example providing large print has been a real issue in my experience. Museums really need to unpick a lot of issues internally”
They also talked about invisible barriers to access that need to be dealt with - beyond simply opening the doors to visitors.

“People can struggle to realise that all those factors [enabling access] are more than just the obvious, the doors open ... all the invisible barriers that are there”

In terms of museums tackling controversial subjects, or encouraging debate, stakeholders believed that a real concern here relates to the public’s perceptions and understanding of some of these subjects. How museums engage with the public on subjects such as human rights and social justice requires a real understanding of the public’s interpretation of language. The need for museums to recognise and respect the public’s trust in their ability to put on objective, balanced displays to stimulate discussion is essential.

There was also recognition that museums need to be prepared to take risks and behave as leaders, not simply follow public opinion. The Public Building in West Bromwich was widely attacked in its development, but has become more accepted as people see it providing value to their community.

“The Public Building was a huge risk, it is an incredible space and it was attacked time and time again ... it was a completely new building to put into a space ... but the community is beginning to take it on board and be part of it”

“People’s attitudes about museums have evolved through the media portrayal of the purpose of museums and what’s been very strong is messages over the last 10 years from directors ... saying ‘we’re not here to solve social problems’”

Stakeholders suggested that some of the purposes were more relevant to specific museums than to the whole sector, for example topics like climate change.

The public believe that museums can most effectively tackle challenging subjects with the distance of time, providing a historic perspective. Stakeholders thought that this was helpful in shaping how museums tackle current challenges, providing a historic perspective and posing questions about what that means in today’s debate. For example an exhibition that looks at energy consumption over time - from coalmines to smart meters.

“If you had the topic of powering society ... 200 years ago it was coal mines and chimney sweeps and now it’s oil rigs and network technicians ... doing the same jobs”
Stakeholders endorsed the purposes deemed essential by the public but believed that these could incorporate some of the other ambitions. But stakeholders were clear in their belief that museums could only be successful in going beyond their essential purposes if they worked constructively in partnership with other expert organisations. This is particularly in relation to vulnerable groups, where museums could work with partners to understand how to be more accessible to particular groups in society.
4. Stakeholder views on what museums should be for in the future

Stakeholders were asked, in pairs, to develop key points on what museums should be for in 10 years time.

The predominant difference between public and stakeholder views is temporal. The public are highly concerned that museums do not enter into contemporary (and hence politically driven) arenas, but remain distanced and neutral. Stakeholders, however, agree that museums could incorporate contemporary issues into the work they do, whilst retaining authoritative neutrality.

Museums should:

- **Engage a wider population**
  - Enable as much delight, motivation and enjoyment by as many people as possible

  "Be engines of serendipity - anything can be astonishing"

  "Museums should be engaging with a larger segment of the population"

- **Be more relevant to contemporary society**
  - Use creative content to prompt thinking about current and future challenges
  - Talk about how we can use learning from the past to help solve current issues
  - Do this by highlighting the plight of different people’s experiences rather than taking an activist stance or being seen as campaigning for specific causes
  - Interact with communities to foster interactive relationships and develop relevant partnerships
  - Challenge perspectives and assumptions people hold - via presenting balanced information through collections versus having opinions and ‘telling people what to think’

  "This is how society solved their problems in the past ... how are we trying to solve those problems now?"
• Sustain their own wellbeing for the sake of posterity
  o Nurture and sustain public support and philanthropy for survival

• Contribute to thriving industries and sectors through collaboration
  o Share assets, including digital tools
  o Create more porosity and transparency
  o Work together to share diminishing resources
  o Be less competitive
  o Embed others in the way they do things

“Some of the bigger museums can be fantastically competitive - it’s a waste ... they duplicate effort”

• Inspire and nurture creative and artistic lives
  o Shed light on contemporary lives

“Creating a creative contemporary buzz”

• POTENTIALLY: promote themselves as moral institutions that other organisations can look up to
  o Use the trust they have to shed moral light on other organisations and sectors (e.g. banking, retail)
  o Museums have such little funding and do such positive work with it, that this can be an example to others
  o However, museums need to become much more transparent themselves to do this - which is seen as something they need to work on before this purpose can become a reality

“Museums should be maybe more proactively showing themselves as highly moral organisations that are something every institution should look up to”
5. How far should museums be looking to extend their activities beyond the essential purposes?

Stakeholders found it hard - and inappropriate - to generalise on how far museums should extend their reach. They thought it the responsibility of individual museums to work on understanding their audiences and which themes would be relevant. Museums should then be working with partners to identify relevant challenges and develop solutions.

It was thought that museums often underestimate the resources they already have; museum professionals need to recognise this and utilise resources to develop imaginative and bold solutions. However, this must be a two-way process in partnership with other organisations. Indeed there is a perceived conflict between museums simply following a stated agenda, versus working together collaboratively with others and responding to relevant needs, which may be existing or emerging.

Museums are able to do ‘almost anything’ as long as this is relevant in some way to what they’ve got - and working in partnerships is essential to identifying and understanding connections.

What stakeholders and the public do agree on is the importance of maintaining the trust that is unique to museums. Museums must help stimulate reflection, but not shape thinking - both sides agree that museums must not preach to their audiences, regardless of the nature of the issue at hand.

“They should maintain their integrity, but ... never preach ... just being good will achieve a lot”

“Come to the museum, leave your prejudices at the door and we’ll have conversations because we’re a neutral space in which things can be discussed ... where else can you go where it’s a neutral space?”