

Museums in the UK – Recent Trends

Hedley SWAIN

(Interim Head of Museums of Arts Council England)

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Introduction

I am very pleased and honoured to be here and would like to thank Jenny Chiu and The Agency for Cultural Affairs for the invitation. I was last here in 2013 just after Arts Council England (ACE) had accepted national responsibility for the development of museums in England following the closure of the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA).

It is nice to be back to be able to tell you how things are currently going with museums in England. What I shall do is give a very brief overview of the museums sector in England and the UK. Then talk about the political, cultural and economic factors that are influencing government and museum policy and how the museums sector has responded to these factors. I will then talk more specifically about how government and Arts Council are acting to support the museum sector. And finally I will draw some conclusions as to how I think museum are currently faring in the UK and what I think might happen in the future.

Brief Overview of UK museum sector

It is estimated that there are about 2,550 institutions in the UK that call themselves museums and have collections of one kind or another. Of these about 1,800 are part of the Accreditation Scheme and about 1,400 of these are in England.

The national governance and policy lead arrangements for museums in the UK are complex reflecting a long and ad hoc history of development and in particular recent devolution arrangements.

The Accreditation standard is run for the whole UK and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) is also a UK wide body, however, each country (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) has its own arts council and devolved governments that also fund national museums in the different countries. So although the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) funds and has a responsibility for museums in England it has no responsibility for museums in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. At this point it is worth remembering the

disparity in population between the countries. England has a population of about 53million, 9million of whom live in London. Scotland has about 5 million people and Wales about 3 million people and Northern Ireland 1.8million. So please forgive me if I primarily talk about England.

Governance arrangements in English museum are equally complex and varied. There are about 20 national museums in England that receive some core funding direct from national government (this includes museums such as the V&A and British Museum and total government investment is a bit over £300m per year), a large number of museums are still run and funded by local authorities, although this number is rapidly declining. Slightly over 50% of accredited museums are now “independent” in that they are governed by independent trusts, normally charities. Although it is normal for many collections and buildings to stay in the ownership of local authorities. There are also a large number of university museums (such as the Ashmolean in Oxford and Fitzwilliam in Cambridge).

However, all of these museums will expect to get some of their funding from public sources either through regular funding or project based grants. But commercial activity (revenues from shops, cafes, etc.) is becoming more and more important as is philanthropy – fundraising. And many museums charge visitors for some or all of their visits.

This model is encouraged. It is considered healthy for an organisation not to be too reliant on a single source of income. Arts Council considers a perfect model is where less than 50% of funding comes from a single public source, but a more practical goal might be considered where about 30% comes from core public funding, 30% comes from other types of public funding and about 30% is commercial income.

It is the case that it is UK government policy that entrance to national museums should be free of charge. And there is continuing strong political support for this. However, many museums in England do charge for entry and all of the nationals charge for their special exhibitions.

All of this makes for a complex picture in terms of trying to develop national strategic policies – as governance is so varied and so few museums are directly under the control of government change cannot be imposed and consensus is important.

Arts Council England since 2011 has had the lead strategic role for developing the museum sector in England and I will talk in more detail later about what this entails and how it is developing.

As mentioned Arts Council inherited these responsibilities from the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) when that organisation was closed down. The disbanding of MLA was linked to the financial crash of 2008 and then the new Coalition Government making

large scale public funding cuts as well as making a commitment to reducing the number of non-governmental agencies. In effect all of the MLAs museum and library responsibilities transferred to Arts Council with its archive responsibilities transferring to The National Archives. Although financial savings were made the overall resources dedicated to museum and library development in England remained about the same through the transfer.

As noted DCMS has individual funding agreements with the national museums that it provides direct funding to, however, it mainly looks to ACE for policy advice.

The HLF provides project funding for museums on a competitive basis. These funds have been crucially important for the excellent state of many UK museums and their ongoing success. For example it is estimated that HLF puts about £30-£50million into funding English non-national museums each year and most major museums in the UK have benefited from HLF funded capital projects.

There are a number of important independent sector wide bodies. The Museums Association is a professional membership organisation. The Association of independent Museums represents museums outside direct public control. The National Museum Directors Conference (NMDC) represents national museums. There are many smaller organisations representing parts of the sector. All these organisations and many smaller ones have a voice in debates about policy.

It is also worth remembering just how varied UK museums are in terms of their collections. There are many encyclopaedic museums that try and represent all world cultures, the natural sciences, art, and social history. And there are also many, many specialist museums, military museums, sports museums, museums based on individuals and their homes. The list is almost endless. And museums have been part of the UK cultural landscape as public institutions for several hundred years.

Overall it is a complex landscape: three national funding agencies in England (HLF, DCMS and ACE) and many hundreds of very different museums with a mix of governance and funding arrangements with many different types of collections, buildings and targets audiences.

Current major UK preoccupations effecting government and how museums are responding

I will now summarise the current political, economic and social factors at work in the UK that are pre-occupying the government and policy makers all of which to one extent or another influence museum policy and how the museum sector is responding.

Brexit

Brexit is currently completely dominating British politics, both in terms of an ongoing ideological debate – was it the right thing to do? And undertaking the practical negotiations in the hope that it will not be too detrimental to the UK economy and its standing in the world.

Brexit is not directly effecting museum policy other than in preventing government from thinking about anything else!

It would be fair to say that many in the museum sector, but by no means all, are anti the idea of Brexit. The museum sector in the UK by its nature tends to think of itself as international. Many staff are not from the UK and there are many international partnerships. However, Brexit is UK government policy so publically funded museums will not actively campaign against it.

And so far museums have not identified any noticeable adverse effects. But of course we are at a very early stage.

Brexit also revealed big differences in Britain about how people thought about Britain and its place in the world. There were geographic differences but also differences between people of different wealth and background.

Diversity

Changing demographics is another major concern. As with much of the western world our population is rapidly aging and we are dealing with large scale migration from a wide range of countries. Again these lead to particular political issues – how much are we prepared to pay for the care of the elderly and adapt as a society, how many immigrants do we want and of what kind and how should we seek to assimilate them into British life?

Museums have a role to play here, making themselves “age friendly” and also both making a diverse range of audiences welcome but also explaining the wider context of migration and different cultures to audiences.

One of the things that makes the UK museum sector (and indeed other European countries) distinct is the very wide range of collections from all around the world. This is very much a result of colonial and imperial history and linked to this the enlightenment ideal to have encyclopaedic collections. But because of this we often have collections that reflect the people that are now moving to the UK as migrants.

Of course at the moment in Europe we also have the problem of “home grown” terrorism and the extent to which we can play a part in de-radicalising people who may want to go on and cause harm to others.

The diversity issue is a major one. It is recognised that traditionally museums in the UK have mainly been used by particular segments of the population – the indigenous white, better educated and more prosperous groups. And yet it is recognised that if museums are going to be truly relevant and indeed use tax payers and lottery player’s money they should be for all people.

So currently there are many initiatives to undertake projects that will engage with wider populations as well as making museums more welcoming to everyone, not just traditional audiences. Part of the problem is museum staff. The vast majority of museum staff in the UK are white from well off backgrounds and often have one or two degrees. The profession is also becoming more and more dominated by women, although senior leaders are still mainly men.

This challenge is recognised and there is general agreement that museums will struggle to be relevant to everyone in society if museum people are not fully representative of that society. But it is also accepted that it will take time to effect a change.

Public funding and wealth creation

Linked to Brexit is a wider question about wealth creation, and the extent to which public services can be funded. Government policy since the financial crash of 2008 has been to severely cut back on public finances, but this has been political and selective in what funding cuts have effected. Arts and culture at a national level have not been cut. Indeed recent governments have been very supportive of culture, not only avoiding cuts but trying to find new tax incentives to help.

However, local authority budgets have been severely cut and this in turn has led to big cuts to local authority museums.

In turn emphasis has also been given to the ability of art and culture in general and museums in particular to create wealth in places by generating tourist income, and also their ability to support other public services that have been cut such as children and adult services.

Recognising the fall in public funding particularly in local authorities has led to more of these museums moving to independent status. This in turn has led to an overall recognition of the value of good business models and the opportunities from commercial activity. And in turn this has emphasised the need for museums to operate in a business like fashion and have

the most qualified staff possible. A lot of this emphasis has come from the independent sector which already operates in this way and from national museums which have been encouraged by government to operate in a semi-independent business like way.

On the whole this has been successful. The major nationals like the Tate and V&A are now only about 50% reliant on public money for their total income. However, it is accepted that this situation makes it even harder for local authority museums to succeed, and commercial success and fundraising is much more difficult outside London and for smaller institutions.

Museums are also working hard to demonstrate their wider value to society. This includes the recognition that museums are a major draw for tourists and therefore wealth creation. This is not just for major tourist destinations like London, Bath and Oxford but the recognition that if well planned museums can make a contribution to the economy of any place.

Linked but different to tourism is the idea of “place making”. The idea that museums along with other cultural provision can help a place become more desirable to not just visit but for working and living. This in turn has led to museums trying to place themselves more strategically in the planning for local places.

Most towns and cities in the UK have lost their original function, places that were industrial centres, ports or markets no longer have that function as before. So places are looking for new ways to give themselves a distinct identity and culture, and museums as part of this are seen as important. There are now places in England that are using museums and culture as the prime mechanism for regeneration and new wealth creation. Examples include Margate with the turner Contemporary and Wakefield with the Hepworth Gallery.

Cultural tourism and soft power

Place making and with it the idea of cultural tourism have a national as well as a regional role. Britain remains a major draw for foreign tourists and it is acknowledged that museums and the wider arts are a core part of this. This idea was re-emphasised by the success of the 2012 London Olympics and the associated “Cultural Olympiad” where it was recognised that world class cultural provision helped project a positive image of Britain.

Museums and museum programmes played a relatively minor role in the London 2012 Cultural Olympics. The most important events were the opening and closing ceremonies. However, there was also a branded “London 2012 Festival” that included a wide range of artistic and cultural activity including several major museum exhibitions. In addition as part of the cultural olympiad programme there was a specific museums programme called “Stories of the World”. This involved nine programmes involving 61 museums.

The concept was relatively straightforward: museums were asked to pick an element of their collections or a strong theme that could be supported by collections and that came from somewhere else in the world or were influenced from somewhere else in the world and then put together an exhibition and associated programme of events that included curation by local British young people but also included involvement of people from the source communities of the collections. So for example if Chinese collections were being used it would be expected that partnerships were developed with China itself but also with Chinese communities living in the UK and with young people local to the museum. The programme was very successful in making regional museums feel more confident about working with young people and indeed different communities.

Stories of the World also helped regional museums work internationally, something the larger UK national museums also do well. This is encouraged by the British government and embraces the idea of “soft power” the use of culture to build influence abroad. Many UK museums, making the most of their international collections have embraced this and are actively building partnerships abroad. No doubt Japan will want to think about how culture will help make the Tokyo Olympics a success.

Health and wellbeing

Another important debate in the museum sector at the moment is that around the role of culture in health and wellbeing – the extent to which individuals and communities having a rich cultural life will lead to them relying less of public health services.

I have already mentioned the aging population as being a major concern. More generally the cost of health care in the UK is a major political issue. The ideals of the national health service – everyone having good and free health care at the point of delivery is still cherished but the ability to pay for it is becoming more and more difficult as people live longer and health cures become more expensive. Again museums and arts and culture more generally recognise they have a potential part to play. There is now lots of evidence that active participation in cultural activity of different kinds helps good health. However, so far although there are lots of individual examples of good projects this has not transferred into widespread funding and activity.

Skills and learning

Museums continue to have a key part to play in education in all its different forms. This includes traditional school visits and educational materials in support of the national curriculum. Although here there has been a tension between the value of core skills (writing, reading, mathematics, science) which are seen as essential as against softer skills of the

type delivered by cultural activity – use of the imagination, creativity, empathy etc. Although it has also been recognised that as the creative and digital economy become more important at the expense of traditional industries museums will have a particular role to play in making their collections and creativity available.

Creative and the digital economy

As the digital economy and its opportunities become more important another concern for museums is using digital technology to its maximum benefit. Digital technology is now a normal part of displays and interpretation. But it is also being used more and more as a communication and marketing device, for example through social media. Many museums are doing really exciting things but overall for budgetary reasons museums tend to be behind other arts organisations and definitely behind commercial organisations in terms of maximising digital technology.

Collections and scholarship

Most of what I have talked about is how museums have been responding to external circumstances. Of course there is also the ongoing development of museology. As museums try to become more relevant to society and become more involved in wider issues it is worth remembering that it is their collections and how these are cared for, made use of and interpreted for audiences that makes them unique.

A debate continues about museum collections – what should be collected, what resource should be put into caring for collections and under what circumstances collections can be disposed of. As museum budgets get squeezed there has been more pressure on the ability to keep large collections and in a few cases objects have been sold in order to help museum finances. Although so far this has been rare. The professional standards and guidance used in the UK have done a good job in protecting unethical sales. In one examples recently an English local authority chose to sell an Egyptian statue in its collection against professional advice. The sale did go through however, the museum lost its accreditation and any chance of further funding from Arts Council or HLF.

It is also the nature of UK museum collections that there are regular requests for repatriation from indigenous communities or originating countries. Again professional guidance seems to be dealing with this well and so far the number of returns has been relatively few and non-controversial. Human remains in particular have been returned to Australia and New Zealand.

As more museums become independent and more commercial the need to protect collections should museums get into financial difficulties is recognised but at present there is no strong

safeguard in place. There is currently a cross-sector working party looking at this. In recent years there has been one major example of an important museum collection being put at risk because of external financial circumstances – the ceramic collection of Wedgwood in Stoke. This was only saved by a fundraising campaign and the V&A stepping in and taking on ownership.

All of this also emphasises the need for high quality museum scholarship – expertise in collections and the need for this to be balanced against other museum skills in such things as learning, interpretation and indeed marketing and fund raising. Another ongoing debate in the UK is the extent to which traditional scholarship is needed and can be afforded, particularly in smaller museums. And it is certainly the case that there are far fewer traditional museum curators in smaller museums. This in turn has led to the need for specialists in larger museums to share their expertise and work in partnership with smaller museums.

Government policy and strategy response

As noted above Arts Council England inherited the national policy and strategy lead for museums in England in 2011.

Arts Council is an "arm's length body" separate from government with its own governance structure but linked to government and receiving its funding from government and the national lottery. It was founded in 1947 at the end of World War Two. Its role is to advocate for, develop and fund the arts. This role now includes museums and libraries.

Arts Council currently employs about 425 staff in nine offices across England.

Arts Council has a ten year strategy; "Achieving Great Arts and Culture for Everyone" which has five goals:

- Excellence is thriving and celebrated in the arts, museums and libraries
- Everyone has the opportunity to experience and to be inspired by the arts, museums and libraries
- The arts, museums and libraries are resilient and environmentally sustainable
- The leadership and workforce in the arts, museums and libraries are diverse and appropriately skilled
- Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts, museums and libraries

You can see how some of these goals map well against the priorities I have outlined, but others are not covered. The current strategy is due to be complete in 2020 and we have just started the process of writing our new 10 year strategy that will run from 2020 to 2030 and

no doubt will encompass some of these new concerns. Overall Arts Council understands the context in which museums are working as I have described it already and much of our effort and funding is there to make museums as relevant as possible in terms of government and society priorities.

Linked to our strategy and the challenge of the external circumstances discussed above Arts Council have developed what it calls the Holistic Case for culture where it advocates for investment in arts and museums not just for their own sake but because they can make a major contribution to economic, social and educational needs.

In terms of funding, in total ACE spends about £850 million per year through three main funding streams.

- A national portfolio of regularly funded organisations on 3-4 year funding cycles. There are about 700 of these organisations across the country and they vary greatly in size and scale.
- Grants for the arts. A competitive lottery programme where arts organisations and artists apply for project funds.
- Strategic funds – a series of funding programmes which attempt to fill identified strategic gaps. Recently these have included funds that have attempted to improve leadership skills, help with fundraising and get art to areas of low engagement.

Up until this year museum funding (which has been about £50m per year) has been kept separate and ring-fenced. However, it is now the intention to fully integrate museums into these funding streams. So museums can become national portfolio organisations, can apply for lottery money and can benefit from strategic funds.

This will bring museums in-line with all the other artforms (dance, theatre, music, literature, etc.) that Arts Council supports. Overall museums have been very happy to work with Arts Council and pleased that funding levels have been maintained. However, needless to say there has been a bit of uneasiness in the museum sector about this. There is a worry that they will not be given equal prominence alongside artforms that have been dealt with by Arts Council for much longer and that Arts Council will not have the expert staff to fully understand the complexities of museum issues, particularly those not related to the arts – like science and technology collections. I would like to think these fears are unfounded but they do need to be addressed.

Our new national portfolio of organisations will include 202 museums formed into 57 partnerships or consortia.

One thing we will hope to see as part of integration is museums working more closely with artists and arts organisations. Of course there is already a long tradition of this but we should now see more and more exciting examples.

In addition to the national portfolio organisations and an ability to apply for other grant programmes Arts Council will also continue to support a national museum development network. This provides £3m per year to a network of museum professionals to support the many small museums accredited or seeking accreditation across the country but who do not have professional staff.

One advantage of integration is likely to be the extension of tax breaks for touring museum exhibitions. Several years ago this scheme was introduced for dance and theatre productions that were toured to other parts of the country – the purpose being to get high quality productions to parts of the country they would not otherwise be seen. This has been a major success and added considerably to the incomes of some organisations. A similar model is now proposed for the touring of museum exhibitions.

Arts Council delivers its museum services on behalf of DCMS which has overall governmental responsibility for museums. Last year they undertook a review of Arts Council functions which was very supportive but called for a fuller and faster integration of museums. Last year also saw the publication of a government paper on culture. This in turn led to a national review of museums. This review is currently nearing completion so I am not able to talk about its findings. But overall it is likely to agree that although there are problems in some parts of the sector as discussed here the majority of museums and museums overall are thriving. Its main observation is likely to be the difficulty of having three different national bodies (HLF, DCMS through its funding of national museums, and ACE) and because of this the difficulty of having a single joined up national strategic approach and the danger of duplication of functions. It is unlikely that the review will recommend major change but closer working relations between these organisations will be expected.

Although Arts Council England is trying to integrate as much of its activity as possible with other arts there are a number of strands of museum activity that remain unique to museums that Arts Council will continue to support.

The Accreditation standard is considered to be incredibly important in offering a common standard of good practice across the whole sector. It is currently being reviewed. It always runs the danger of being over bureaucratic and complex while also always trying to adapt to a changing landscape. However, I have no doubt it will continue to play a key role in keeping the UK museum sector strong.

We also continue to maintain the Designation Scheme which recognises collections of national significance outside of national museums – it is the nature of the way museum have

developed in the UK that many such important collections exist, many of them in university collections. In the past there have been specific funding streams to support designated collections but it is unclear how it will develop in the future.

Finally Arts Council continues to deliver a series of cultural property schemes on behalf of government. This includes a government indemnity scheme that provides insurance for museum objects on loan and which saves museums millions of pounds every year and thereby allows for wide scale loaning of objects both in the UK and internationally.

We also oversee an acceptance in lieu scheme that allows tax breaks for those who donate important objects to public collections. Finally we oversee the licencing of antiquities being export and advise when this should be blocked.

Conclusions

There are lots of examples of truly excellent museum practice at many levels in the UK. And one of our great strengths is that this excellence can be found in the smallest local museums and the largest nationals.

However, it seems to be the norm for people in the museums sector in the UK to often think the worse and imagine they are in constant crisis. However, when the museum review was undertaken earlier this year the report back was of a museums sector that was largely very successful and doing great things for audiences.

On the whole this is the case. Few would not describe England's national museums as hugely successful. If they have a problem it is that they sometimes have too many visitors! They have great buildings and collections that are well looked after; they are putting on great programmes and exhibitions; doing great scholarship and working internationally. So they are contributing to the UK's wealth and self-confidence. This is all helped by relatively strong funding from central government; good leadership; good income diversification and strong brands. At the same time government does not interfere in their running.

The same is largely true for university museums. Most independent museum are also doing well. Again well run with diverse income streams. The group of museums that are struggling are the local authority museums. Starved of funding they are also often less well run and hampered by local council bureaucracies. Many of these are in the process of moving to independent trust status, something that is often difficult and leads at least initially to problems as they struggle to adapt.

Much of my day to day work with museums at the moment is helping them transfer from local authority leadership to independent charitable trust status. I have no doubt this will be a trend

that will continue. This is all about the best governance and leadership and supporting this. The better museums are run the less intervention there needs to be from government.

At a Practical level we are also concerned with the full integration of museums into the Arts Council family. I have no concerns about this having seen how other artforms have managed the transition. It is already a very positive outcome that when I discuss different places with local councils or others I can now talk about the totality of cultural investment: arts, libraries and museums. However, this process will take time and it is the case that museums with their buildings and collections are different from other artforms and will continue to need some unique services. One of the priorities for Arts Council in the next two years will be to oversee this integration.

At a strategic level apart from good governance and sustainable resilient business models our biggest concern and as already discussed is diversity: making sure museum people reflect the wider population and making sure museums are engaging with as many people as possible without barriers. This concern will spread to collections – what we are collecting and what we are choosing to keep in collections and how we are using them to make them relevant. As mentioned earlier the incredible range of UK museum collections makes them ideal for this task but it does involve deconstructing historical models of why collections were put together in the first place and how they have been cared for. A powerful example of this might be Islamic collections. Many museums such as the V&A hold collections from the Islamic world however traditionally these have been looked after and studied by traditional scholars who have seen them as decorative and fine art. These collections have the potential to be used in powerful ways to engage with modern British Muslim populations in all sorts of dynamic ways but only if we are prepared to enter into new dialogues about their relevance.

Overall despite many challenges, both in wider society like Brexit and ongoing government cuts and in the sector like the lack of diversity it remains a very buoyant time for the UK museum sector with lots to look forward to and no challenges that are not surmountable.

As I wrote this paper it occurred to me that as might be expected there are many similarities with Japan but also many major differences. While I am here I look forward to learning more about Japanese museums and how they function and I hope this talk will give Japanese colleagues much to think about as they plan the development of their own sector.