

**CONSULTATION RESPONSE**

**MLA Review of *Renaissance in the Regions***

6<sup>th</sup> July 2008

*Declaration:*

The Collections Trust (formerly the MDA) has received funding directly from the *Renaissance* programme with a total value of approximately £300k over the past 3 years.

The Collections Trust will continue to be a recipient of *Renaissance* investment during 2008-9. The majority of this investment is being applied to the provision of Museum Development services under the *Collections Link* brand.

The Collections Trust, along with a range of other stakeholders, has been asked to respond to the following questions:

- What do you consider to be the five most important achievements of the Programme?
- What hasn't it achieved that it should have?
- What has been good about the way the Programme has been designed and managed, which you would like to see continue?
- What would you change about the design and management of the Programme?
- What is the most important thing to get right for the future?

The Collections Trust's response has been developed in consultation with staff, the Board and key external stakeholders.

## 1. The 5 Most Important Achievements of Renaissance

### *Impact #1 – Political Profile*

- 1.1 The single most powerful impact of *Renaissance* has been in raising the political profile of museums.
- 1.2 Prior to *Renaissance*, the highest-profile public campaign in museums related to the withdrawal of admission charging by the Nationals. As a piece of public and fiscal policy, this was counterproductive. It reinforced the impression that the National museums *represented* all museums, created public confusion about the independent sector and signalled a real-terms reduction in turnover for those affected.
- 1.3 By contrast, *Renaissance* is a good news story. It has the right blend of appeal for a conservative electorate while also celebrating a hitherto undervalued part of the nation's cultural heritage. Critically, *Renaissance* was a recognition – the first in some time – that museums outside London held beautiful things which were worth managing and preserving.
- 1.4 Today, if politicians and civil servants across Whitehall know anything about museums, they know about free admission and *Renaissance*. The simple expedient of raising the profile of the sector with this community has undoubtedly contributed to the existence of the *Cultural Olympiad* and will be a key factor in the future advocacy for and sustainability of the sector.
- 1.5 The benefit of *Renaissance* as PR is felt far beyond the National and Hub museums and has dramatically benefitted the industry as a whole.

### *Impact #2 – Professional Standards*

- 1.6 The second most significant impact of *Renaissance* is in raising the professional game of museums throughout the UK.
- 1.7 Everywhere, across the UK sector, museums and museum professionals are better and more confident in the management and presentation of their collections than they were 5-6 years ago.
- 1.8 The contribution of the *Collections Link* service to this process has been highly significant. *Collections Link* has gathered awards and plaudits across the museums sector (nationally and internationally) as a high-quality, authoritative source of best practice advice and guidance. The website, the advisory service, the national training database and the directory of networks are used by thousands of managers, practitioners and students every week and the feedback on the service has been almost universally positive.
- 1.9 *Collections Link* stands as one of the most solid, practical and sustainable outcomes of *Renaissance* and has helped fulfil the *Renaissance* aim of raising best practice across the sector. It has supported collaboration and knowledge-sharing between local, regional and national museums, as well as with related domains such as libraries and archives.
- 1.10 *Collections Link* has played a role in developing the skills of the museum workforce, and also in extending the horizons of individual practitioners in considering related disciplines such as project and programme management. Considering the situation as it stood before *Collections Link*, the service represents a huge leap forward in the quality and accessibility of professional practice.
- 1.11 What is perhaps equally significant is the way in which *Renaissance* has raised the self-perception of museums throughout the country. With increased public and political profile has come increased confidence across all museums, not just the Hubs.

- 1.12 This kind of *intangible* impact can be very diffuse and hard to measure, but we would argue that, alongside *Collections Link*, it is one of the most lasting and important contributions which *Renaissance* has made to the sector.

#### *Impact #3 – Regional Representation*

- 1.13 *Renaissance* coincided neatly with a Governmental priority towards regionalisation. With the referenda in Scotland and the publication of the *Your Region, Your Choice* white paper, it became essential that the sector – in the form of its strategic agency *Re:source* – could present a robustly regional offer.
- 1.14 It is perhaps easy to forget - particularly in light of the recent moves by Margaret Hodge and others towards consolidation in the Regions – how fast-moving and significant this agenda was. There was a very real chance that cultural funding would be devolved into *Regional Development Agencies*. The *Foot and Mouth Epidemic* of 2001 had profoundly altered the prospects of all rural and regional businesses, including museums. *Renaissance* and specifically the *Regional Agencies* were an entirely logical response to an emergent situation.
- 1.15 That the Regional Agencies are now being phased out is as much to do with the lapsing of Government support for regionalism as it is to do with any specific failing on their part. What was an expedient (albeit too loosely-managed) mechanism 3 years ago, has now become an expensive aberration.
- 1.16 That notwithstanding, regions *are* important, economically and socially, and the contribution of *Renaissance* in enabling museums both to be represented and to deliver a more coherent offer at a regional level has been extremely significant in the past – even if it does not continue to be so in the future.

#### *Impact #4 – Leadership*

- 1.17 The museum sector has always had a problem with leadership, primarily because the number of top-level jobs which require it is relatively limited. The impact of *Renaissance* in increasing the opportunity for talented leaders in the sector has been marked.
- 1.18 Almost overnight, when the first tranche of *Renaissance* funding was released, a generation of talented and motivated leaders appeared to implement it. Without naming individuals, the generation of Hub leads includes some of the sector’s most politically astute and capable people and their contribution to the overall development of museums has been significant.
- 1.19 Perhaps most astutely, the Hub leads didn’t fall into the same trap as the Regional Agencies of internecine scrapping and regional competition (or if they did, they kept it much better-hidden!). This meant that the Hub leads were able to be effective, and to ‘sell’ a more consistent message into the central administration.
- 1.20 *Renaissance* has effectively trained a generation of people in management and leadership, and this increase in skill will have a positive impact on the sector for years to come.

#### *Impact #5 – Money*

- 1.21 It doubtless hasn’t had the impact it could have, and some of it could have been better-spent, but the overall impact of the financial investment of *Renaissance* into the sector has been undeniable.

- 1.22 The core and infrastructural investment of *Renaissance* into the Hub museums has been significant, and it has enabled those museums in particular to improve the quality both of their management and of their services to the public.
- 1.23 The support offered by *Renaissance* to infrastructural organisations such as the *Collections Trust* has enabled us to honour the UK's role as a world-leader in professional standards for museums and in turn to lever investment into the sector from public, private and international partners.
- 1.24 Although the risk of creating a generation of Hubs and Hub-nots is ever-present, the overall economic health of the sector (evidenced in things like the movement of people and projects), has benefitted significantly from *Renaissance*.

## **2. Where *Renaissance* Hasn't Delivered**

### *Issue #1 - Infrastructure*

- 2.1 UK museums are funded through a complicated mix of channels. The basic blend of Local Authority, DCMS, University and MOD funding is overlaid with income-generating activity and short-term project-funding.
- 2.2 In this kind of environment, it is always long-term infrastructural investment which suffers. Compelled to pursue shorter-term agendas and outcomes, it can be difficult for organisations to invest in their long-term physical and economic welfare.
- 2.3 Representing as it does *programme* investment, *Renaissance* represented (represents) an unique opportunity to invest longitudinally to the benefit of the museums, their collections and their audiences. In many cases, it should have presented organisations with their first opportunity to look out, beyond the strictures of the endlessly-constrained annual Funding Agreement and towards a longer-term plan.
- 2.4 To be fair, many of the people involved in the management of the Hubs appreciated this opportunity and sought to develop programmes of work which addressed longer-term priorities. The problem was that *Renaissance* never 'bedded-down' for long enough that museums could be confident in this position.
- 2.5 The net result of this situation is a poisonous blend of optimistic investment and dependency culture. Instead of enabling the Hub museums to invest strategically and build infrastructure cautiously, they have had to go all-out every year to demonstrate the direct impact of their expenditure on audience outcomes.
- 2.6 This means that many of them are carrying inflated fixed costs for salaries, equipment and accommodation which they have no hope of covering themselves (or of having them covered by their Local Authority) in the event of a reduction.
- 2.7 The link is therefore too immediate – if *Renaissance* suffers, Hubs and all associated activity suffers. It would have been preferable to enable the Hubs to use some of the money to create a buffer between themselves and the immediacy of the funding situation.

### *Issue #2 – Transformation*

- 2.8 *Renaissance* hasn't *transformed* museums, or the quality and scope of what they can offer to the public. It has, by and large, enabled some museums to do what they were going to do, better and for a marginally expanded audience.

- 2.9 For all the evidence and impact and work directed at specific educational audiences, there has been a lack of transformative thinking and innovation, almost since the pre-history of the Programme. Because of the complexity of administering a programme like *Renaissance*, and particularly of using it as an instrument of change, true innovation - like the *Inspiring Learning for All* framework - seems to have affected it only tangentially.
- 2.10 *Renaissance*, for all its achievements, remains firmly rooted in a traditionalist idea of what a museum should be. Although the participating museums may *feel* transformed because they are surrounded by new architecture and new colleagues, we are still very much the same old sector we were before *Renaissance*.
- 2.11 The big agenda – creating and effectively marketing to the general public a clear and positive idea of what museums can do – remains frustratingly elusive. The problem of museums is the problem of their positioning and identity in society, and it is the problem of *all museums*, not just of some particular ones.
- 2.12 The fact is that *Renaissance* has done almost nothing to penetrate the public psyche, nor to impact on a long-term process of establishing a clear and consistent offer as an industry. Where it has touched people’s lives, it has done so on a project-specific, short-term basis.

### *Issue #3 – Clarity*

- 2.13 *Renaissance* has never managed to articulate a clear definition of *what it is*. This is the root cause of many of the issues identified elsewhere, and a critical point to appreciate for any future iteration of the programme.
- 2.14 If you conduct a vox-pop with any reasonably-sized audience of museum professionals, they will struggle to agree a definition of what *Renaissance* is for and what it is seeking to achieve (we have done this exercise in the past). Some believe it to be a funding programme, others believe it to be a method for improving education, still others believe it to be a way of promoting regional centres of excellence in particular areas of museum management.
- 2.15 This lack of clarity arose during the genesis of the programme itself. There is a gulf between the recommendations of the original report, and what has now been delivered. There is still further a gulf between what the profession understands to be the priorities for *Renaissance* and those priorities as they appear to be regarded by DCMS and Treasury.
- 2.16 The Office of Government Commerce guidance on Programme Management mandates a clear expression, early in the life-cycle, of the *success criteria* for the programme. Without these, it is impossible to close the programme successfully and identify successful delivery or learn lessons for the future. What would a *successful Renaissance* look like? How would the museums sector at large be different as a result? Who would be the primary beneficiaries of this improvement? All these questions remain unanswered in the case of *Renaissance*.
- 2.17 It is perhaps one of the greatest difficulties with *Renaissance* that it has funded a proliferation of small, time-limited regional projects, all of which have aspirations to develop national principles and strategies. In the absence of a coordinating voice, this has resulted in a massive duplication of effort and a range of broadly similar but disconnected services competing for limited market-share. That many of the regions hold Digital Strategies and frameworks for museums, when technology cuts across nations and sectors, is patently ridiculous.
- 2.18 This situation has presented the *Collections Trust* with a genuine challenge in recent years as the national body for standards and best practice in Collections Management. *Renaissance* has effectively exacerbated

exactly the kind of proliferation of unqualified advice and expertise which *Collections Link* was originally designed to resolve.

### **3. What has been good about the management of *Renaissance* and what would you change?**

3.1 In answering this question, it is important to draw some distinctions. There are clear differences in:

- The *leadership of Renaissance* at a national scale
- The overall management of *Renaissance* as a programme
- The *administration of Renaissance* as a set of funded activities
- The management of individual activities within the programme

3.2 The overall life-cycle of *Renaissance* has been characterised by two periods of leadership and a series of long intervals where leadership was apparently lacking.

3.3 *Renaissance* was born from a coordinated effort across heritage and the creative arts. It succeeded in bringing together disparate voices, articulating a clear case and winning the support of politicians and funders.

3.4 The second round of leadership occurred around the 2007 CSR and was effective in securing ongoing investment in the Programme. In some cases, this was a more complex piece of work than the original lobbying – requiring the construction of a compelling case for support carefully delivered through a series of well-planned strategic and political interventions.

3.5 So...*Renaissance* was well-led when it needed to be. What it wasn't, was well-managed once the funding had been secured. There are many reasons for this lack of central management. The overall trajectory was marred by changes of personnel. The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), didn't always know where to 'put' *Renaissance* as a strategic initiative, and had at times to downplay its significance in the name of its cross-domain remit.

3.6 There is also a case to be made that it has only been very recently that the programme has acquired a director with sufficient experience and focus to oversee the successful implementation (with the exception of the original director, who was a casualty of the transition from Re:source to MLA and did not have time to implement the full scope of his vision) – by which time the capacity for change across the programme had become severely limited.

3.7 An interesting case revolves around the project to *brand Renaissance*. This process was marred by a wavering between control and decentralisation. MLA wanted to control the process, but couldn't quite bring itself to – resulting in a tremendous amount of additional work and much to-ing and fro-ing between different partners. This inconsistency has proved typical of the management of *Renaissance* – a combination of frustration, seeking control but at the same time not having the confidence to implement this control effectively.

3.8 The administration of the programme, on the other hand, has been as effective as it could be under the circumstances. Financial management has been broadly effective, with some notable lapses, and there was a period towards the middle of the programme where the junior and middle-management staff established a very strong working and administrative relationship with the stakeholders in the programme.

3.9 Grants have mostly been paid within a reasonable time, reports have been received and filed, plans have been received and also filed. In terms of the nuts and bolts *doing of Renaissance*, this has been implemented reasonably effectively.

- 3.10 The management of individual activities under the programme has most been very effective. Many, many projects have been delivered on time and within budget. The difficulty has not tended to be in *getting things done*, but in doing the right things and understanding where they sit in the broader context of national delivery.
- 3.11 Going forward, there are some important lessons to learn:
- 3.12 People, and particularly the most senior figure in the programme, are absolutely vital. *Renaissance* is a complex programme with many stakeholders and it requires a rare blend of conviction, vision and diplomacy to ensure that it is effective.
- 3.13 If it is to be administered centrally, *confidence* is absolutely vital. MLA has been given a hugely significant mandate, which has never sat entirely comfortably in the context of an organisation which has undergone a significant period of change and uncertainty. It is very much to be hoped that the new MLA, under the leadership of Roy Clare, will have the courage and conviction necessary to wield its authority effectively.
- 3.14 The old principles hold true. It is the responsibility of leaders to set the 5-7 year vision and ambition of the organisation. It is the responsibility of managers to turn this vision into 3-5 year priorities and to manage budget and resources effectively to achieve them. It is the responsibility of administrators to manage the processes and systems which enable all of this to happen. Each layer of management has to be aware of and confident in its position and capable of delegating work effectively. In this, *Renaissance* is no different from any other endeavour of a reasonable scale.
- 3.15 Some new principles are also important. The process of managing *Renaissance* is the process of marshalling a tremendous amount of knowledge – tacit and explicit – from a disparate range of sources and of using this knowledge to inform future development. The new disciplines of Knowledge Management and particularly Business Intelligence are particularly applicable to this kind of information-rich environment. *Renaissance* should not only *deliver*, it should be *intelligent* – which means gathering knowledge in a structured way and applying it to what happens in the future.
- 3.16 This last point is critical – *Renaissance* in some ways represents a time-limited inflation of capacity within the regions. Hence the Hubs have become beacons for knowledge and expertise which they do not have the capacity to sustain. In the absence of a coordinated approach to capturing and sharing that knowledge, much of the overall value of the *Renaissance* investment will be lost when the programme comes to an end. Given the short-term nature of this situation, we believe that it is a critical error to invest in the Hubs the responsibility for programmes of work which *must be sustained* such as the *Accreditation Scheme*.
- 3.17 There are also some problems to which there are no clear answers. It is fair to say that *no* public administration has cracked the effective delivery of national programmes on a regional basis. There are many models, some more effective than others, but none is perfect. There is a perennial question about *Renaissance* of whether it is a *regional* programme with a *national* administration, or a *national* programme delivered through a *regional* infrastructure. We believe that differing views of this dynamic are the root cause of the disjointed relationship between MLA, the Hubs and the Regional Agencies.

#### **4. The most important thing for the future**

- 4.1 There are many lessons, and many things which could change about the management and leadership of *Renaissance*. Above all, however, is the question of *what happens next*.
- 4.2 *Renaissance* is a programme, and one of the features of programmes is that they have a limited lifespan. It is not in the nature of public administrations to resource programmes indefinitely, and particularly not so when that administration is interested in excellence, innovation and sustainability.
- 4.3 *Renaissance* is not sustainable in its own right. In the event that public funds are withdrawn, the programme ends and with it the sector loses a significant amount of the additional capacity which it has been able to resource.
- 4.4 As a sector, we can object to the withdrawal of *Renaissance* funds, we can lobby and provide evidence of why it is a good thing. All of these strategies may succeed in the short-term, but they aren't realistic options for the long-term future of the sector.
- 4.5 The priority now is to come together and think about what the *next Renaissance* will be. It may be to do with the Olympics. It may be to do with post-Olympic legacies. It may be something completely different to do with delivering a world-class sector, but it's unlikely to be *Renaissance*. Politicians are relentless neophiliacs, and *Renaissance* is no longer new.