

Museums Association Collections for the Future report

MDA Feedback

Author: Nick Poole, Director, MDA

MDA is the UK's lead organisation on the management of information about collections. As such, we welcome the *Collections for the Future* report as an important opportunity to progress a central debate in the museum community, and we are grateful for the opportunity to comment on this draft.

Our comments are provided from a dual perspective:

1. As the national organisation responsible for holding in trust the industry standard for managing information about collections and;
2. As an organisation with a responsibility for advocating the link between best practice in collections management and enabling meaningful engagement.

Summary of comments

There is a tremendous amount in the report that is of real value. MDA is particularly glad to see that we are included in the final section as a group for ongoing consultation. Similarly, there are important points made about information and knowledge management in museums which MDA will be working to address over the next few years.

However, we also feel that there are a number of missed opportunities within the report which could be addressed relatively straightforwardly in a final draft. These include:

- The need to define 'use' of a museum collection
- The possibility of driving an agenda instead of inheriting wider social agendas
- The long-term oscillation of the sector between 'access' (or engagement) and care
- The importance of managing information about objects within collections
- The importance of developing the management procedures within SPECTRUM as the de facto industry standard

These points are explored in greater detail in the following sections.

Defining 'use'

The report makes several mentions of the 'use' of collections and enabling them to be 'seen' in different contexts. However, in the absence of a definition of use, this leaves the discussion heir to the very confusion which it is seeking to address.

What does it mean to 'use' a collection? Is it the act of going and looking at it, or does it refer to a deeper kind of engagement? Does the use of information about the collection, for example in the form of documentation records, constitute use? Does use change according to the context or intent of the user?

The point is that our understanding of ‘use’ is intimately related to the kinds of services which we provide to enable it. If we do not, at heart, know what we mean by it, then how can we as a sector encourage more of it?

Similarly, if we are to move beyond a world of essentially quantitative ‘best-value’ performance indicators to something more qualitative, developmental and meaningful, we need to establish what it is that we are actually trying to measure.

Recommendation: Ideally, MDA would be looking for the widest possible definition of the ‘use’ of a collection. Much of our work is driven by the idea that well-managed information about collections can promote new modes of use and engagement. We are also firmly committed to the principle that the lack of consistent information about the objects in our collections is one of the most significant inhibitors for museums in achieving their potential.

Whose Agenda is it anyway?

MDA notes the references at the beginning of the report to the concept of the public ‘realm’ and cultural entitlement. We believe that it is appropriate for the report to reflect Estelle Morris’s conception of museums as part of the wider family of public services.

However, there are a number of elements in this first section which conspire to give the impression that museums are moving grudgingly towards social agendas which they do not fully understand or own. Even if this is, in fact, the case, MDA does not believe that this is the right message to be sending about a vibrant and significant creative industry.

The public realm is not a new social concept. The idea of a social commons of which museums form a part is decades old. MDA believes that it is useful to refer to the idea, but that it is equally important not to present it as a radically new departure in socio-political thought. This is particularly so since many museums will see themselves as occupying this position already.

‘Cultural entitlement’ has a greater degree of legitimacy as a new direction, although it is still very much rooted in the notion of a social commons. However, the overall impression within the report is that there remains very little consensus about what it means. Since this is the case, MDA is concerned that it is ‘central to the thinking behind this report’.

The phrasing of the initial section, and particularly the use of the word ‘buffeted’ gives a very strong impression that the museums sector is powerless to set agendas for itself, to lead or to aspire to lead in accordance with its own priorities. MDA believes strongly that this is not the case, and that we as lead organisations within the sector must be very careful to ensure that the vocabulary we use does not convey an implicit sense of inferiority to other public sectors.

Allied to this point is the fact that the report does tend to reflect an institutionalised tendency towards the problems, as opposed to the achievements of the museums domain. MDA certainly agrees that there are large and important obstacles to be overcome in the management of collections, but at the same time museums have continued throughout to provide exactly those ‘moments of life-changing revelation’ to which the report refers. If we as a sector lack ‘corporate’ confidence, then it is going to be very difficult to inspire confidence in our social, political and public sector peers.

Recommendation: MDA would like to see two additional sections at the beginning of the report. The first would be an Executive Summary highlighting the key points and defining the way ahead. The second would be a very positively-worded section about the response to the consultation, the

willingness of museums to change and grow and highlighting some of the sector's key achievements in recent years.

Access or care?

This is one of the longest-running debates in the museum sector, and MDA confidently predicts that it will continue for years to come. However, there are some important points which are not necessarily apparent in the body of the report.

MDA strongly supports the shift in emphasis from 'access' to 'engagement', and we agree that there is a false assumption that work on collections detracts from modernisation and progress (although we are not sure that a 'dichotomy' can be 'inaccurate'). We believe that this difference between access and engagement resides in the ability of the museum to express the knowledge implicit in an object in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the user. We further believe that this knowledge can only arise through the appropriate documentation and management of information about the collection.

One of the principles that defines the work of MDA is the fact that only by managing the information about collections in a consistent way can we make them truly accessible and engaging for users. An object that is appropriately recorded and documented and about which knowledge is available in a way that is independent of individual curators becomes a working part of the museum. An object about which there is no documentation becomes a storage overhead.

Accordingly, MDA regards access and preservation as occupying different ends of the same continuum. Without properly managed collections there is nothing for users to engage with. Without the engagement of users, there is no point managing the collections.

We feel strongly that there is an important factor which needs to be made apparent within the report – that of the ongoing effects of a project-funded cultural sector. MDA believes that the long-term preservation and management of collections has suffered in recent years as a result of the emphasis on learning and access inherited from funding distributors.

The difficulty is that learning and access lend themselves to short-term 'quick wins' of the type which naturally appeal to funders, particularly where influenced by political cycles. The benefits of documentation and collections management are far longer-term. Worse, it is often only really possible to present the importance of this work in terms of the negative impact of not doing it over the long-term.

MDA believes that the cycle of priority is returning towards stewardship, but in a way that has inherited the short-termism of the lottery-funded era. The belief now is that there are 'quick wins' in collections management, for example through digitisation, bulk accessioning or collections-level description. We believe that it is the role of MLA, MDA, MA and others to make the case for long-term investment in the thoroughly unglamorous 'day job' of looking after collections.

We note the reference to the perception of the archive community as serving a 'research' function. There is a significant point implicit in this, which touches on the preceding point about the definition of 'use' in a museum context.

People do not complain about the access model for archives for two reasons. Firstly, because the archives community have been very careful to manage the expectations of their users. Secondly, because part of this management of expectations has involved the systematic, rigorous and professional recording of information about their holdings. This is not solely limited to a 'research'

function, but is very strongly indicative of the importance of managing information about collections where they cannot all be put on public display.

We agree with the importance, highlighted within the report, of regarding museums as a trusted and authoritative source of information. Although museums have not yet found a way of arranging this authority behind a 'brand', it is going to be absolutely critical to the long-term survival of the sector in an age of networked information retrieval. It is worth pointing out that the public library domain is well advanced in establishing an authoritative online brand for itself, and that museums must work very hard to ensure that they do not become a subsidiary of libraries in the knowledge economy.

Finally, there does seem to be a real lack of focus to this section of the report. We appreciate that it has a lot of ground to cover, but the narrative/policy thrust of it is lost relatively early on. We feel that too much is being brigaded under the generic heading 'engagement' which could more usefully be split into subsections such as 'formal and informal learning', 'interpretation', 'digitisation' etc.

Recommendation: MDA would suggest that the 'engagement' section of the report should be subdivided into more meaningful subsections. We would also like to see the inclusion of references to the implications of project funding, as well as a clearer exposition of the intrinsic link between access, engagement and documentation/information management.

The importance of managing information about objects in collections

In some ways, this is a similar point to that made previously, but it is worth highlighting in its own right.

None of what museums are trying to do can be done without a systematic approach to the management of information about objects that is driven by national standards. Information, in the form of a documentation record, is the additional dimension which turns a physical object into a working part of the museum itself.

MDA does not promote documentation because we think it's a good idea for people to make lists of their objects. We do it because there is a life-cycle to every single object in a museums collection, and everything that happens to that object is part of its history. The documentation of a collection is, in a very real, practical sense, every bit as important as the collection itself.

Recommendation: MDA would like to suggest that the importance of information and knowledge management should be made more apparent throughout the report. It is most apparent in the section on *Strengthening the Museums Sector*, but as the above points demonstrate, it is equally relevant to the concepts of engagement and *The Dynamic Collection*.

SPECTRUM Procedures

Acquisition, disposal, loans and transfer are all the subject of specific procedures within the national SPECTRUM standard. MDA is due to publish the revised edition of SPECTRUM shortly, which includes updates to all of these procedures.

We appreciate that the sections covering these issues under *The Dynamic collection* are more conceptual than procedural. However, we believe very strongly that the report should be encouraging museums towards best practice in how they approach these processes. Currently, neither SPECTRUM nor MDA are apparent within this section, which is a cause of some concern for us.

Apart from our vested interest in promoting best practice, we feel that there is a simple and compelling business case for museums following the guidelines set down by the national standard. If a museum has to reinvent these processes for themselves, and by association the mechanisms to deliver them, then they will be more costly, take longer, and be likely to give rise to additional problems. The intention of the standard is partly to put in place a generic process by which these problems can be avoided or overcome.

Recommendation: MDA is very keen to work with MA and the whole of the museums community to embed best practice and national standards as key parts of this work. We would accordingly like to be referenced specifically in the actions for MA as a key means of taking this forward. We would also like to see specific reference made to SPECTRUM as the national standard governing these processes.

General points

We hope that the above comments have been a useful contribution to MA's thinking towards the report. We also have a small number of additional comments which do not fit under the more specific headings:

1. MDA publishes 'SPECTRUM Knowledge' as a blueprint for knowledge management in museums. We feel that this is an important but hitherto neglected area of museum activity, and we would like to have the opportunity of working with MA to take it forward.
2. MDA has collected a wide range of case studies relating to the management and documentation of information about collections. We would be glad to make these available to MA if they could provide useful illustration of some of the points set out above.
3. MDA provides a CPD framework of quality-assured training resources. We have also been involved in some of the early conversations around the establishment of a wider CPD framework for museums through the emerging Sector Skills Council. We strongly support MA's commitment to working both with museum studies courses and policy leaders to progress this agenda.
4. MDA also provides a direct advisory service to museums. We feel that the provision of national standards within a policy framework is only one part of the equation. The other, equally significant part is to equip museums with quality-assured advice and training which makes it easier for them to engage with this framework.

Conclusion

MDA believes that this is an important piece of work which could prove to be a milestone in the development of many of these arguments. We would like to ensure that the report itself is easier to read overall, and that the importance of the management of collections information is made more apparent. Other than this, we are very happy to lend our support to the MA in progressing the issues it raises.

