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The Network Newsletter: tackling social exclusion in libraries, museums, archives and galleries

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The Network's Website is at www.seapn.org.uk and includes information on courses, good practice, specific socially excluded groups, as well as the newsletter archive.

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Broader issues – Libraries, Museums, Archives and Cultural and Heritage Organisations

Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone ...

In November 2010, following a period of consultation, the Arts Council published its 10-year strategy for the arts¹, *Achieving great art for everyone*. This set out their long-term goals:

“Goal 1: Talent and artistic excellence are thriving and celebrated
England is regarded as a pre-eminent centre for artistic excellence.

Goal 2: More people experience and are inspired by the arts
The arts are at the centre of people’s lives – more people are involved in arts in their communities and are enriched and inspired by arts experiences.

Goal 3: The arts are sustainable, resilient and innovative
Collaborative and networked, the arts are known for resilience, innovation and their contribution to the nation’s reputation and prosperity.

Goal 4: The arts leadership and workforce are diverse and highly skilled
The diversity of the arts workforce reflects the diversity of society and artistic practice in England. Outstanding arts leaders play a wider role in their communities and nationally.

Goal 5: Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of the arts
Children and young people have the best current and future artistic lives they can have. They are able to develop their artistic capabilities and engage with, and shape, the arts.” [p12 – emphasis theirs]

It also set out their changing role, emphasising advocacy, research and rigorous evaluation to build “a powerful, longer-term evidence base for policy making and demonstrating public value.” [p13]

Arts Council England have just published a companion document, *Culture, knowledge and understanding ...*² which sets out a draft strategy for libraries

¹ *Achieving great art for everyone: a strategic framework for the arts*. Arts Council England, 2010 (ISBN: 978-0-7287-1493-9). Available to download as a pdf (165.97 kb) from:

http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/achieving_great_art_for_everyone.pdf.

² *Culture, knowledge and understanding: great museums and libraries for everyone – a companion document to ‘Achieving great art for everyone’*. Arts Council England, 2011 (ISBN: 978-0-7287-1504-2). Available to download as a pdf (146.48 kb) from:

http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/culture_knowledge_and_understanding.pdf.

and museums – there is an “informal consultation” running from September 2011 to March 2012.

This has taken the framework set out in *Achieving great art for everyone*, (which has been re-looked briefly at via Estelle Morris’s paper³) and developed it for libraries and museums; as Alan Davey says in his introduction:

“It is meant to be read alongside the original, but also to stand alone. It focuses on museums and libraries, and how the long-term goals we established to guide our investment in the arts will be modified to guide our work with museums and libraries.” [p5]

In the scene-setting chapter, “Today and looking forward”, the document sets out:

- A brief survey of “the landscape” in which libraries and museums are operating;
- Emphasises the importance of “excellence” (and highlights a couple of difficult areas: “For example, the success of the negotiations between libraries and publishers to provide public access to e-books is critical to the ongoing innovation of the library service; so too is the live debate in museums about the way they preserve, record, develop and provide access to their collections – particularly those not on display.” [p11]
- Stresses the importance of “Connecting with people” [see below]
- Outlines ideas about achieving “Future resilience and sustainability”
- Looks briefly at ways in which museums and libraries might assist in “Changing lives and communities” [also see below]
- Outlines ways of ensuring that we have “The next creative generation”.

“Connecting with people” and “Changing lives and communities”

The document speaks strongly about these roles for museums and libraries, for example:

“One measure of excellence in museums and libraries is in the degree of their engagement with people, which is critically dependent on the quality of the experiences they offer and the depth and authenticity of those experiences. Many have a long track record in this respect and have done much to engage diverse audiences. The role libraries play as information and learning resources to help create empowered and informed citizens and promote equality of opportunity is evident in the breadth of their audience. There is a big opportunity for libraries to lead the way in increasing engagement across the cultural sectors.

Whilst there is much to celebrate, there are no grounds for complacency. Museums and libraries share with the arts the need to continue to

³ Estelle Morris. *Review of the Arts Council’s strategic framework*. Arts Council England, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (333 kb) from: <http://www.museumsassociation.org/news/14072011-what-do-you-think-aces-goals-for-museums-should-be>. This was briefly assessed in *The Network Newsletter*, 122, June 2011, pp7-8.

broaden access, and many common challenges exist. Demographic changes, a growing and ageing population, different consumption tastes and patterns accelerated by new technology, and the changing needs of users, are all creating new demands and pressures.

The Arts Council is keen to see museums and libraries continuing to innovate in their approaches to engaging with communities and making more effective use of volunteers; we are keen to see them working together to achieve this. We see real opportunities to achieve economies of scale and greater impact where museums and libraries are innovating in digital media to promote their programmes, or sharing their assets in collaboration with one another and with external partners. We also see opportunities for the sectors to share their data and knowledge about users and non-users and to promote each others' work more effectively to support people who want to learn. Finally, we see great advantage and opportunity in the arts being able to learn from the very important role that museums and libraries play in promoting lifelong learning, particularly for older people." [p11]

And:

"The role museums and libraries play in relation to a broader range of public outcomes (health, education, return to work) is likely to take on a new importance in a context of widespread public reform, as well as strengthening the case we can make for the importance of cultural services to civic life. It will be very valuable for the arts to draw on the partnering skills that museums and libraries have developed and their experience of innovating in the face of change. It is this context of change that requires a new emphasis on dynamic sector leaders and a willingness to embed responsiveness into governance, delivery and management structures. Whilst the Arts Council is committed to promoting the specialist expertise that sits at the heart of museums and libraries, we recognise that we must also support these sectors to embrace new skills and knowledge and greater capacity to adapt to change.

A further challenge for museums and libraries will be to ensure that their workforces are more reflective of the communities they serve. Whilst these sectors have concentrated to great effect in broadening audiences, the diversity of the workforce remains a challenge. Pockets of best practice have the potential to show the way; we will be seeking to identify and promote these examples as we tackle the shared challenges of pushing for equality of access to the training, work and career opportunities that our funding supports." [p13]

These themes are then woven into the Arts Council's long-term vision and goals:

- "Goal 1: Excellence is thriving and celebrated in museums and libraries
- Goal 2: More people experience and are inspired by museums and libraries
- Goal 3: Museums and libraries are sustainable, resilient and innovative

- Goal 4: The leadership and workforce in museums and libraries are diverse and highly skilled.
- Goal 5: Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of museums and libraries.” [pp7-8]

Here, we have focused on those areas which relate to social justice and community engagement:

Goal 1: Excellence is thriving and celebrated in museums and libraries
This includes:

“We will focus our investment on those excellent and forward thinking museums and libraries best able to drive innovation, care for their collections and share learning. We will support those looking to expand their horizons, whether through ambitious programming, new ways of engaging people or international partnerships that bring new collections and insights to communities ...

We will support those museums and libraries at the forefront of embracing diversity through co-production with users, giving priority to those who are developing their offer in consultation and partnership with the people using their services ...

Lastly, we will support purposeful partnerships across the arts, museums and libraries to drive up the excellence of all. We will invest in those artists, organisations and collaborations exploring the boundaries between different cultural forms or between art and science or art and technology and the ways in which different intellectual starting points can illuminate different perspectives and create new audiences for the benefit of all.” [p19]

Goal 2: More people experience and are inspired by museums and libraries

“We will build on the role that museums and libraries play at the heart of communities, inspiring civic pride, a sense of place and making a valuable contribution to local economies by driving visits and tourism.

We will support museums’ and libraries’ work with communities, learning from their work with the public as active partners and creators. We will consider how the arts might benefit from the culture of volunteering that sustains many museums’ and libraries’ links with their local audiences.

We will place museums and libraries at the heart of our work with the people and places of least cultural engagement, looking to learn from the success of libraries in attracting people that the arts find it hard to reach and encouraging cross-cultural partnerships.

We will develop our touring and digital work to encompass museums and libraries and encourage a greater sharing of collections and assets, extend reach and generate richer experiences for audiences.

We will embrace the lifelong learning work that museums and libraries have led the way on, building this into our broader work with the arts. We will champion the importance of creative experiences to people's wellbeing and development and the role access to knowledge and information plays in supporting and inspiring these." [p21]

Goal 3: Museums and libraries are sustainable, resilient and innovative

"We will strengthen our relationships with the co-funders who are so critical to museums and libraries, especially local government, the heritage sector, higher education and private benefactors.

We will support, encourage and promote those museums and libraries that are the most innovative and enterprising, building strong business-like models from which others can learn. We will champion a debate with others about the future of museum and library services.

We will work with partners, including government, to encourage and enable a higher level of private giving to the arts and culture, advancing our work around philanthropy to embrace our wider role. We will encourage those museums and libraries built on the philanthropic donations of an earlier age to continue these proud histories, emphasising the important role of local people and communities as champions, advocates and fundraisers.

At a time of funding reduction the duty to make maximum use of physical and human resources – buildings and expertise – is pressing. We will encourage networking, collaboration and partnership across museums, libraries and the arts, to stimulate local innovation, share learning and capture efficiencies." [p23]

Goal 4: The leadership and workforce in museums and libraries are diverse and highly skilled

"We will act as a steadfast champion of diversity across the arts, museums and libraries, focusing in particular on creating equal opportunities to enter these workforces.

We will encourage skills development, collaborative working and knowledge sharing, seeking to ensure that mainstream funding responds to the training needs of museums and libraries. In this, we will encourage museums and libraries to embrace a wide range of skills while recognising and refreshing the expertise that has traditionally sustained them.

We will renew our commitment to leadership development, exploring what constitutes excellent, honest, courageous and adaptive leadership across our wider remit.

We will learn from museums' and libraries' work with communities, particularly those museums and libraries that are embedding these skills in new, more responsive and diverse governance and delivery models.

We will build cultural advocacy skills across the arts, museums and libraries, so that the people working in them can become more confident collectively in winning support for the contribution that the arts and culture sectors can make to society.” [p25]

Goal 5: Every child and young person has the opportunity to experience the richness of museums and libraries

“We will initiate a debate about what constitutes excellent arts and cultural provision for children and young people by building a shared quality framework that draws on models like Inspiring Learning for All.

We will argue for a coherent and targeted approach to high quality arts and cultural provision for young people, working with national and local government, funded arts and cultural organisations, museums, libraries and other partners, schools and higher and further education institutions.

We will ask the newly established group of Bridge organisations within our national portfolio of funded organisations to pioneer new relationships between education, the arts, museums and libraries.

We will use Renaissance and our investment in partners to build on the world-leading practice in museums and libraries, looking to share learning across the arts about those brilliant programmes that have been inspired by, and produced for, with and by children and young people.

We will adapt our children and young people’s programmes Artsmark and Arts Award to promote this best practice.” [p27]

The document finally looks briefly at the proposed Arts Council role up until 2015, which includes:

- Taking forward the revised Renaissance plans for museums
- Developing the second phase of the Future Libraries programme
- Working towards integrating museums, libraries and the arts
- Building in mechanisms for evaluating success (eg via funding agreements).

During the “informal consultation”, the Arts Council will:

- “engage with the museums and libraries sectors through the programmes we are implementing, specifically Renaissance and the Future Libraries programme
- work with key partners like the Association of Independent Museums, the Museums Association, the National Museums’ Directors Conference, the University Museums Group, the Local Government Group, the Society of Chief Librarians and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals to consult with the wider constituencies they represent
- continue to take an active role in meetings and conferences tackling issues relevant to museums and libraries

- encourage an active engagement with stakeholders at a local level, including by running a further programme of regional conversations in spring 2012.” [p35]

So far, it would seem that there is a serious commitment by the Arts Council to pursuing the social justice/community engagement aims of museums and libraries (although these were originally overlooked in Estelle Morris’s review).

A review of research and literature on museums and libraries

However, this consultation document is supported by the publication of a patchy paper⁴ which, whilst describing itself as “a review of research and literature”, concentrates on published research as opposed to the broader literature. So, for example, whilst it allows room to mention Anwar Tlili’s work which throws doubts on the social role of museums, it does not draw on the work by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries – or, indeed, *Open to all?* or any of the work by The Network.

Admittedly, it does show that there is still a dearth of real evidence of the impact of museums and libraries in some areas, yet it also redefines the role of libraries and museums in quite a different way from the consultation paper, concentrating on hard research evidence and excellence, for example, rather than on broader social policy.

Does this give voice to a dilemma for/within the Arts Council as to which direction to go in? It would be terrific if the direction set out by the consultation paper was actually the one followed.

Finally, The National Archives have published a very brief summary of their proposed approach to archives, *Together, better*⁵ and have just launched webpages, “Leading the nation’s archives”⁶.

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⁴ Rachel Smithies. *A review of research and literature on museums and libraries*. Arts Council England, 2011 (ISBN: 978-0-7287-1505-9). Available to download as a pdf (208.93kb) from:

http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/a_review_of_research.pdf.

⁵ *Together, better*. The National Archives, 2011. Available to download as a pdf (96.93kb) from: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/together-better.pdf>.

⁶ See: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archive-leadership/>.