

## Ethical guidelines 4 - Access

**MUSEUMS FOR ALL** *“Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.”*

This definition was adopted by the Museums Association in 1998. The principle underlying these words is that museums belong to everybody. All members of society have a right to visit and use them. Museums have a duty to share knowledge and to give delight, to be approachable at every point of contact, to reach out to audiences, to offer reasonable access to their collections.

### **What does it mean to be accessible?**

There are two elements: the physical and the philosophical. Museums are coming to terms with the first. They ask themselves relevant questions. Are opening times convenient for users? Are entrances welcoming? Are there ramps as well as stairs? Are labels legible and toilets available? As important are the philosophical assumptions. Why and how are objects acquired? What criteria are used in documentation and display? What values drive publicity campaigns? How do we select the language of our labels and publications? The health and vitality of museums can best be judged by the quality of their relationships with people. The stronger a museum's commitment to improved access, the better those relationships will

become. New audiences will be attracted, existing visitors will return more often, partnerships with other institutions will flourish. Museums that demonstrate that they not only speak to their users, but also that they listen and learn, have a stronger claim for funding. Museums committed to improvement further inspire their staff and motivate their governing bodies.

**The needs and demands of those who use museums will continue to change**

However good museums may be today, they must go on making improvements. Everyone associated with museums knows the pleasure and enlightenment that museums can bring; this commits us to a policy of continuous evaluation. All museums, however specialised their subjects or remote their locations, can develop new audiences and deepen relationships with existing users. To do this museums must acknowledge that individuals have varied backgrounds and have different and changing physical, intellectual and cultural needs.

Accessible museums, those that properly fulfil their mission, need to consult and involve all their stakeholders including visitors, non-users, members of governing bodies, partners, funders and staff members. Museums also need to take account of the contributions of past generations, particularly benefactors, communities of origin and creators of the objects which they now safeguard. Consultation will be made more effective if museums show a generosity of spirit: a willingness to share collections, expertise and decision-making processes with

others. Ultimately, the governing body has a responsibility to set a policy framework for improving access. All who work for museums have a personal responsibility to contribute to this process.

Museums have a duty to provide access **today**. Unlike most other cultural organisations, they equally have a duty to safeguard for **future** generations their collections and other resources, including information and expertise. In addition, museums must respect the intentions of benefactors and other stakeholders in the **past**.

Widening access is a long-term process but can be started with a series of simple actions. The following questions should be asked:

**A** How can the experience of those who visit your museum buildings and use its services be enhanced?

**B** How can the total number of people who use your museum be increased?

**C** How can your museum extend the use and appreciation of its collections and related expertise?

**D** How can your museum ensure that the range and diversity of those who use it is as wide as possible?

Each of the questions above are discussed in the sections A, B, C and D, which follow. Sections E, F and G consider further issues:

**E** A Way of Thinking and Acting: Partnership, Consultation and Involvement

**F** Intergenerational Equity

**G** Limits to Access

**A. How can the experience of those who visit your museum buildings and use its services be enhanced?**

**A1.** All museums should be continually improving their standards in all areas of their work with the aim of enabling each individual audience member to have an inspirational, educational and enjoyable experience.

**A2.** Many museums are successfully engaged in a process of transformation and it is possible for all museums to strengthen their relationships with their users. A key to this is to involve stakeholders, including visitors, non-users, members of governing bodies, partners, funders and staff members. However expert museum staff are, it will always be beneficial to consult when planning changes to service provision, developing policy and reviewing performance. Museums should make full use of their own audience research and research undertaken by other organisations. They will also need to turn to other sources of specialist advice (see section E 'A Way of Thinking and Acting', below).

**A3.** Poor quality services will make it harder for users to benefit from museums and discourage repeat visits. It is crucial – and relatively easy – to keep up with current thinking and good practice both in museums and elsewhere in areas such as:

- exhibition and interpretation
- presentation and care of collections
- education
- outreach

- visitor services
- marketing, press and publicity

*(For an introduction to the large amount of published material on these subjects see further information, below.)*

**B. How can the total number of people who use your museum be increased?**

**B1.** One of the key signs of the success of a museum is the number of people visiting and the volume of users of other museum services, such as numbers of enquiries, attendance at events, visits to websites, and sales of publications.

**B2.** Most museums are able to accommodate greater numbers of visitors than they currently attract and should aim to do so. It is, of course, not possible for museums to be all things to all people, but all museums can aim to provide something of prospective interest to every potential individual visitor.

**B3.** Some people do not feel that museum visiting is for them, so there is also a need to consider potential users who are unable or unwilling to come physically to museums. All museums can develop new audiences and reach more people through services such as outreach, the internet or publishing.

**B4.** To increase numbers of visitors and users, your museum should plan and implement sustained programmes of work which:

*1.* Disseminate information about the museum and its services. All museums should review how they can improve their communication with potential users.

*II.* Tackle physical and sensory barriers. All museums should have in place a programme of work to make their buildings and displays widely accessible, otherwise people with particular disabilities will be either prevented from visiting or unable to gain optimum benefit from their visit. Consider, too, whether outreach and on-line services and publications can be improved so that they do more to meet the needs of people with physical or sensory disabilities.

*III.* Interest your audience and avoid intellectual barriers. Take account of different educational experiences, learning styles and ways of understanding. Aim to provide things of interest to everyone.

*IV.* Tackle cultural and language barriers.

*V.* Make everyone feel welcome and valued.

*VI.* Examine financial barriers. It is important to formulate policy on charging which recognises the ability of the user to pay. If levied, admission and other charges should be structured so that they are socially sensitive. (For more information see Museums Association Ethical Guidelines on Trading and Commercial Activities, especially sections 3-5.)

*VII.* Outreach to people who cannot or will not visit.

*VIII.* Increase the impact of publishing. Publishing can play a key part in increasing education, inspiration and enjoyment for visitors and non-visitors and should not be seen solely as a means of generating

income.

*IX.* Encourage 'virtual visits' via the internet. Websites have huge potential to reach users and should not be seen only as a marketing tool to attract visitors to museum buildings.

*The above is partly extracted from the list of barriers to access in the Museums and Galleries Commission publication Building Bridges*

**C. How can your museum extend the use and appreciation of its collections and related expertise?**

**C1.** Museum collections are a valuable resource for learning and enjoyment. All museums should strive to improve use, knowledge and awareness of their collections. Museums should do everything possible to help and encourage people to explore the collections and related expertise and information. Give people a choice of types and levels of access.

**Access to collections**

**C2.** Providing general access to entire collections can present particular challenges but museums should aim to offer some form of access to all of their collections, including those parts not normally on show. In particular, your museum should:

*I.* Hold and safeguard its collections on behalf of society. Members of governing bodies should regard themselves as custodians or trustees of the collections rather than their absolute owners. Staff should avoid behaviour that creates the impression that they think they own the collections.

*II.* Aim to provide public access to all parts of the collections. In many cases it will be impossible to achieve

this immediately, but this does not lessen the need to plan how it will be achieved in the long term and to provide clear public information about the access that is currently available.

*III.* Increase access to stored collections. This can often be achieved through relatively small changes. For example, all changes to storage arrangements should be designed to improve public access; developments that reinforce or create additional barriers to access undermine the purpose of museums.

*IV.* Provide alternatives such as photographic records or documentation of those parts of collections where direct access cannot be made available. The publication and digitisation of collections needs particular attention where there are insufficient resources to make them directly accessible.

*V.* Reconcile conservation and security requirements with users' rights of access. The onus is on museums to devise ways of providing access to their collections that do not jeopardise their safety. (See also section F, 'Intergenerational Equity', below.)

*VI.* Presume in favour of loans to other museums (and other organisations) where access will be increased by lending.

*VII.* Consider transferring items to other museums that are better able to care for the items and where access to them (both now and in the future) can be improved. (For further information see the Museums Association's Ethical Guidelines on



Disposal, especially section 4D.)

*VIII.* Ensure that there are adequate resources to care for new acquisitions in the long term. Irresponsible acquisition of items can reduce access to collections as a whole. (For further information see the Museums Association's Ethical Guidelines on Acquisition.)

### **Information**

**C3.** Museums should research and collate information about their collections and make such research and other related information accessible. Awareness of their collections and information about them can be spread through public relations work, guidebooks and websites. Catalogues should be published or made publicly accessible in other ways. Your museum should:

*I.* Assist everyone who wants information about items in the collections. Information held by your museum should always be offered to enquirers, including access to collection files and research carried out by or on behalf of the museum, unless that information is legitimately confidential. (See also section G 'Limits to Access', below.)

*II.* Be prepared to provide, or offer guidance on finding, expert or general information about the subjects that your museum covers. At the very least, politely refer general enquirers to information sources, such as standard published or electronic reference material.

*III.* Where possible reasonable access should be provided to the expertise of individual members of staff. Clear information should be provided for the

public about the expertise that is available.

*IV.* Develop documentation systems with the primary purpose of providing users with an information resource. Such systems should be designed and managed with the aim of optimising benefit to all users.

*V.* Keep, and make available to enquirers, information about items that have been disposed of.

### **Learning and Knowledge**

**C4.** Museums should share their expertise with society in a lively and informed manner. They should adopt a participative approach to learning and knowledge. They have a responsibility to enable and encourage people to enhance their skills in using collections. Your museum should:

*I.* Be sensitive to the views of others and respect their rights to express their views (unless illegal to do so).

*II.* Enable and encourage people to research collections, develop their own ideas about them and create knowledge. Ensure that this research shapes the museum's views about its collections.

*III.* Consider mechanisms through which users can respond to the interpretations of the museum and of others, and can express their own interpretations of collections.

*IV.* Base the interpretation and advice the museum provides, particularly that in displays and publications, on sound scholarship. There should be respect for and understanding of varied cultural and intellectual views of

collections and the ideas they represent and evoke.

V. Recognise that museums often serve to confirm and validate accepted ideas; they should also aim to function as a forum where new or alternative ideas can be discussed and tested. The work of museums is enriched by encompassing varied viewpoints and it is perfectly acceptable to base a display or publication on a specific legitimate viewpoint. However, to avoid misunderstanding, this should be made clear to users and opportunities should be given to reflect differing views.

VI. Strive for editorial independence and be alert to the pressure that can be exerted by particular stakeholders, such as sponsors.

**D. How can your museum ensure that the range and diversity of those who use it is as wide as possible?**

**D1.** Museums should strive to attract genuinely diverse audiences. Diverse participation in museums is a sign of their health and vitality. At their best, museums reflect the variety and complexity of society in every aspect of their work from collecting policies to displays and from staffing to marketing.

**D2.** Individuals have a right to expect museums to strive to meet their needs and museums need to recognise and respect the great diversity of individual attitudes, interests, beliefs, abilities, knowledge and learning styles. It is self-evident that no two individuals have precisely the same needs and outlook. This means that in general it is best to regard users and potential users as individuals and not to define them as members of groups.

**D3.** However, to focus audience development it can be helpful to take account of factors that might influence an individual's needs and interests such as age, physical and intellectual ability, level of education, ethnicity, religion, social/economic status, sexuality and gender. This approach is based on:

*I.* Identifying groups under-represented in a museum's current users compared to the museum's potential audience.

*II.* Setting clear targets for reaching more users from specific under-represented groups.

*III.* Researching the needs and wants of targeted groups and feeding this back into development at museums.

*IV.* Monitoring and evaluating the success of programmes to promote audience diversity.

**D4.** Increasing access is a key part of museum marketing. The success of access policies can be monitored through audience research. Ensure that marketing, press and PR strategies support access strategies.

**D5.** To develop new audiences museums will need to be imaginative and brave enough to take risks, especially the risk of an initiative failing. To minimise this risk of failure museums will need to take advantage of outside expertise, engage in consultation and join with others in partnerships (see section E, 'A Way of Thinking and Acting', below).

**E. A WAY OF THINKING  
AND ACTING:  
PARTNERSHIP,**

**E1.** Long term success in increasing access requires an inclusive way of working. Museums need to have a

## **CONSULTATION AND INVOLVEMENT**

generosity of spirit and be open to the views of their stakeholders, empowering and listening to them and valuing the contribution they can make.

**E2.** Stakeholders include visitors, non-users, members of governing bodies, partners, funders and staff members. Museums should take full account of their views through research and consultation. Much information is available in published form but, in the long term, individual museums are likely to want to undertake their own consultations too, for example by commissioning audience research or establishing advisory groups. The information obtained about stakeholders' needs and wishes must play a full part in the museum's decision-making processes. Power and control should be shared with stakeholders and museums should willingly involve them in museum work, encouraging them to have a direct influence on museum services. Museums also need to take account of the contributions of past generations, particularly benefactors, communities of origin and creators of the objects which museums now safeguard.

**E3.** To make deep and lasting improvements to access, museum staff and governing-body members need to be involved in the process so that entire organisations develop a user focus. This will necessitate long-term professional development and training.

**E4.** The make-up of museum staff and governing-body members needs to reflect the diversity museums aim to achieve among their users. In

many cases positive action will be needed to broaden the recruitment base of staff and governing-body members.

**E5.** Museums should work in partnership with others. A museum should treat a partner as an equal. However, it is important to understand that a museum will often be the more powerful of the two. It controls the way it deploys its resources and is likely to be perceived as the embodiment of cultural authority. It is crucial that museums do not abuse their power, even unintentionally.

**E6.** It is important for museums and their partners to draw up clear statements of aims and objectives and of working methods for their joint projects. As part of this it is essential to clarify the agendas of museum and partner organisations.

**E7.** If advisory groups are used it is crucial for museums not to exploit them. The status and influence of these groups must be made clear to their members; their views should be treated with respect; their confidences must be protected where appropriate; consider, too, whether it is appropriate to remunerate them for the time they give to a museum.

**E8.** In addition to formal partnerships, museums will sometimes need to turn to other sources of specialist advice by, for example:

*i.* Consulting area museum councils and other organisations.

*ii.* Seeking help from colleagues in other museums.

*iii.* Employing consultants.

iv. Consulting community groups and representatives.

**F. 'INTERGENERATIONAL EQUITY'**

**Future Generations**

**F1.** Museums have a responsibility to pass on their resources, including collections, information and expertise, to future generations. This should not limit access for today's audiences and normally museums should be able to reconcile longer-term security and conservation requirements with people's rights of access today.

**F2.** Access should only be limited when this is essential to safeguard particular items for the future. In such cases museums must provide access to reproductions or facsimiles of original items and information about them. It is important to publish the reasons for restricting access and the criteria that will be followed when applications to view original items are considered. These criteria should reflect only the need to protect items for the future and be consistent with the equal opportunities policies that museums adopt.

**Past Generations**

**F3.** As well as a responsibility to provide access to current and future generations, there is a duty to respect the contributions of past generations, particularly benefactors, communities of origin and creators of the objects which museums now safeguard.

**F4.** Ethically museums are obliged not to ignore or override the express intentions of benefactors on public access or other matters, whether or not those intentions are legally binding. Museum governing bodies and staff have a public duty to uphold and comply with the wishes of

benefactors. (See the Museums Association's Ethical Guidelines on Acquisition 4.2A).

**F5.** Where a gift, bequest or loan was made in the recent past, variation of express intentions is unlikely to be justifiable. It should never be considered to remedy any defect or other shortcoming that should have been recognised by a museum in advance of an acquisition. However, for older gifts, bequests or loans circumstances may have changed in such a way that variation of intentions could be in the public interest. In such cases changes should only be made where this would lead to increased access for present-day audiences or improve a museum's capability to preserve those items for the future. Such variations should only be considered when they do not conflict with a benefactor's primary intention. A museum should always take advice to ensure that its proposals are lawful.

## **G. LIMITS TO ACCESS**

### **Balancing different access demands**

**G1.** Many access improvements aimed at one particular group will also improve access for a much wider range of users. However, it is inevitable that some people's needs will conflict with those of others. For example, increased audience numbers may in the case of some popular museums reduce the quality of the visit for individuals. Similarly, the allocation of resources to maximise user numbers will mean less is available to provide for specialist audiences (be they scholars or people from a particular cultural background).

**G2.** Museums need to consider



carefully the way they resolve such conflicts and to make explicit decisions about what they are trying to do. There is a particular need to balance provision made for specific individuals (such as specialist enquirers) against the impact that might make on the long-term provision for an audience as a whole.

### **Legitimate access restrictions**

**G3.** In some cases there are legitimate reasons to impose restrictions on access or display. When access to material is restricted the reasons should be published, as should the criteria that will be followed when applications to view original items are considered (see also section F1 'Future Generations').

**G4.** Consider introducing special access arrangements in cases where individuals or defined cultural groups have a special relationship to an item in a collection. For example, the item may have strong personal, ritual, sacred or symbolic significance. In some cases it may be appropriate to restrict access, allowing it only to specified individuals or groups. In other cases groups or individuals may be entitled to special rights of access. Museums have an obligation to be familiar with, and to respect, the beliefs and moral rights of people with regard to particular objects in the collections. They should consult the people concerned to discuss access arrangements, which should then be agreed by the governing bodies.

**G5.** Other material in the collection, such as oral history recordings, may be subject to confidentiality agreements. Some information may need to be kept confidential in order

to protect sensitive sites. It may be legitimate to restrict access to research carried out by, or on behalf of, the museum for a reasonable period if there is a genuine risk of plagiarism.

**For more information contact**  
**Ratan Vaswani - Professional**  
**Development and Ethics Adviser**  
**020 7426 6956**