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- Develop IT resources

The report is not a consultative document and it stands or falls as it is. A preliminary response is being submitted to DCMS by the end of the year and many services are already actively engaged in developing partnerships to bid for regional hub status.

It is strongly recommended that BCG members are aware of this report and the huge potential changes across the sector that may result with its implementation.

Copies of the report were sent to all registered museums. The full report and a summary report can be downloaded as a pdf file from www.resource.gov.uk

Hard copies of the report are available from Nick Morton on 020 7273 1458.

Renaissance in the Regions? A response to the Regional Museums Task Force Report

Steve Thompson

This is a personal response on the part of the Secretary of the Biology Curators Group (BCG). The views expressed are personal ones should not be taken to be those of the BCG.

Introduction

It should be said at the outset that there is a great deal to be welcomed in "Renaissance in the Regions", the recent Regional Museums Task Force (RMTF) report. The Museums Association has already discussed the welcome aspects of the report, and there is no need to repeat what they have said here. However, the proposals and recommendations could give serious cause for concern amongst those working in smaller museums. (By smaller museum, we mean here all medium-sized and smaller museum services, roughly 1840, or 98.9% of the non-national museums community). This report could be seen as a Beeching Report for museums, and parallels with the evolution of the railway system since that report would be easy to draw.

Before going any further, it should be pointed out that there has been a certain misrepresentation of the curators themselves. We do not feel ourselves to be demoralised.

We certainly have the will, the imagination and the ability to do all that is being asked of us. However, we are chronically under-resourced and grossly overstretched, and so feel very frustrated. The findings of this report give the potential for doing much to change that situation, but the proposals and recommendations seem more likely to aggravate it. Furthermore, there is an enormous wealth of talent, experience and expertise outside of the national and large regional museums that has simply not been acknowledged.

Biases

I will look at the two principal areas of concern only. The first, and somewhat smaller, concern is the subject bias that the RMTF has placed on the report, in concentrating on art and social history, and on the preservation and interpretation the past. This is a gross distortion of the true range of museums interests and activities. Of the 21 projects cited as exemplars, 18 are art or history projects. Of the remaining three, only one is a project that directly concerns the collections themselves. Otherwise there is no reference to technology/industry museums, and no reference at all to science, natural history or archaeology, even though many of the most innovative schemes have been developed within these sectors. Not only is this a misrepresentation of the museum community itself, but also of the user community.

To get an idea of where public interest lies one may look at the most popular "cultural" pastime of all, watching TV. Of those subjects of direct concern to the museum community, a count of programmes over four recent, consecutive weeks shows that there were just 9 arts programmes (not counting "pop culture", which museums generally choose to ignore), as opposed to 20 science programmes, 43 archaeology / history programmes (they overlap too much to separate out) and 66 natural history programmes. It is disturbing, therefore, to see a major report showing such a strong bias, (though understandable when one looks at the make up of the task force).

Furthermore, museums also look at the present

table, table 8, describing the key deliverables, there is no reference to any relationship at all between the hubs and the rest of the museums. All of the deliverables, as described, could be met from within the hubs themselves. In Table 16, certain responsibilities are outlined, but there is no indication of how to ensure that the hubs will meet these responsibilities.

Then there is an implication that the smallest museums, often in small and remote communities, and with very low capacity, would be expected to transfer their collections to a central collection resource centre. Without collections, they are likely to close, as they would then have no resource to draw on. It seems unlikely that the hubs will then provide an outreach service to a community without a museum service, leading to a potential catch 22 situation. Even more worryingly, all collecting activity in that area will also cease. It may even be that much of the collections could be disposed of, as, divorced from their local context, they could be seen to duplicate other material in the central resource. This would result in a net loss of local heritage, and cultural identity, and a homogenisation of national heritage.

This could be avoided by employing a regional strategic organisation, whose self interest is not in conflict with its roles, and which has the appropriate authority. It would direct or withhold funding according to their monitoring of the performance of any institution receiving funding, including the hubs. One might envisage relatively small, autonomous organisations, who will answerable only and directly to Resource. They would deal with the strategic implications of its regional museums network and have a good overview, as well as a detailed knowledge of each part of that network.

The large regional museums, on the other hand, are already large and complex organisations, whose own self-interest is not necessarily congruent with that of the regional network. Furthermore, they are part of a much larger organisation, the local authority, which has its own needs to meet. The museums, in becoming partly directly funded by central

government, via Resource, would then be answerable to two different masters, very likely leading to a conflict of interests.

Re-assessment

There is a strong argument that AMCs should be reconsidered for the role of strategic regional authority, as they already fulfil the criteria. Furthermore, it is not clear why capacity building of the AMC should result in a more bureaucratic organisation. Increased bureaucracy comes about either by an increase in the number of people at the senior, decision making levels, by reducing the efficiency of communications across an organisation, or by increasing the number of levels of hierarchy in the organisation, thus reducing the efficiency of communication up and down the organisation. There is no reason, however, why either of these things should take place. In their new and expanded role, the AMCs would be responsible for creating and implementing a regional strategy. Secondly, they would be responsible for directing the additional funding from Resource to the most appropriate destinations (probably as already envisaged). Thirdly, they would be responsible for monitoring and developing the strategy, including monitoring the performance of the institutions within the region. As they perform these functions now, the AMCs already possess the required functionality. There should therefore be no need to increase the number of departments and the number of senior managers. There will indeed be a considerable extra work burden, but this will essentially be procedural rather than decision making. This could be accommodated by increasing the capacity through increasing the number of people within the existing lower levels of the organisation, where this kind of work is already carried out. Overall, this would result in AMCs with an increased capacity, but operationally as lean and focused as at present.

As this system is already in place, and the AMCs already know their community, the hub system could be up and running in its initial form within a year, rather than in three years, as the current proposals suggest. This would surely be more favourable to central government funders, as well as giving the

chance of a much better consolidated system at the end of the initial five years being proposed.

Final Observation

A final observation concerns who should be a core or satellite organisation. While a large regional museum would almost certainly be the best choice as the core, the geographic location of the satellites, in terms of providing a service out to the other museums in the region, is very important. This is especially so when considering geographically large regions, such as the North West, Yorkshire and the South West, where outlying communities can be a hundred miles away from the centre of the region. In practice, this will make little or no difference to the core organisations, who will almost certainly be the same whatever options are finally followed. However, some satellites may be different under the different proposals. Furthermore, there seems to be no particular reason why the number of institutions chosen should be limited. It should be for the regional strategic authority to decide on the structure, size and composition of the hub. The drive to avoid dilution of any additional funding across too many institutions should be sufficient to ensure that a suitable compromise is reached. However, some of any additional funding should be directed to appropriate institutions outside of the hub. Support in the form of advice, surveys, expertise, and so on, is all very well, but the crucial factor will still remain lack of capacity, which can only be addressed by additional material and financial resourcing. As the report itself says "it is difficult to be resourceful without resources"

Overall, the findings of the report are to be welcomed, but the proposals and recommendations should be seriously reconsidered if it is not to have an effect contrary to that intended. The above discussion assumes that one of the two principal alternatives considered will be implemented, but it may be that further investigation will produce an alternative that is better than either of these.

Steve Thompson, BCG Secretary and Keeper,
Natural History, North Lincolnshire Museums.

Museums Association Conference

29 - 31st October 2001

**Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre,
London**

The Biology Curators Group hosted a session at the MA conference this year on the subject of museums and biodiversity. The session was quite well attended and was up against some hot competition from concurrent sessions. BCG also had a stand in the Market Place where we were able to showcase the new BCG display panels.

The following is the abstract for the meeting and one of the talks presented..

Museums, Biodiversity and Community Biology Curators Group

This is a current hot topic, with concerns riding high at all levels of society over the state of our environment. Museum collections and databanks are vital to biodiversity research. They are key to educating and raising awareness amongst the public and in promoting community involvement in the care of their local environment. This session will look at the activities of a key biodiversity action group and the pivotal role that museums play in fostering essential links between communities and their environment.

Convener:

David Carter

Chair Biology Curators Group

Speaker(s):

Trevor James, Biological Records Centre

Nick Gordon, Leicester City Museums

Caroline Holmes, Holly Hayes Environmental
Resource Centre

Natural History Collections and Biodiversity: an outsider's view?

Trevor J. James

1. Introduction

Whether or not you would consider me an