

The Mendoza Review: an independent review of museums in England – Neil Mendoza, Nov. 2017

The [Mendoza Review](#) of museums in England was undertaken in response to the 2016 [Culture White Paper](#)'s call for a "wide-ranging review of national, local and regional museums, working closely with Arts Council England (ACE) and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF)."

The Review looks at the challenges and opportunities presenting themselves for all of England's museums, including but not limited to those directly sponsored by Government. It explores the themes of government support and funding, the increase and diversification of audiences, the role of museums in community-building and placemaking, and in supporting soft power, as well as sector resilience.

The document also examines the national infrastructure for museums. While focus is placed on ACE-accredited museums, it does consider "the wider context of the sector, which encompasses approximately 2,600 museums in England." It sets out strategic priorities for the sector, and "how DCMS and its Arm's Length Bodies will work better together to create and fund an environment in which they can flourish".

The Mendoza Review aims to present "what individual museums and institutions can do – either by themselves or in partnership with others – to thrive and drive improvement for the sector overall." In this it shares the goals of the National Heritage Science Forum, which promotes collaboration within the field of heritage science to share expertise, promote best practice and tackle issues of common priority.

The Review identifies nine priority areas for England's museums, all of which present opportunities for heritage science. It is worth noting that while the Review is not explicit about the role of research, it has a clear role to play in achieving the called-for sector improvements.

This document aims to highlight these opportunities.

- **Adapting to today's funding environment**

The funding environment for museums is changing. The Mendoza Review makes a series of recommendations to funding bodies, including:

- A joined-up approach between DCMS, ACE and HLF, as key funders of the sector, to provide funding and support directed towards the priorities identified in the Review
- DCMS to lead a more strategic approach to museums across government, including to "more effectively demonstrate the impact of museums on issues ranging from placemaking and participation to community integration, education and trade."
- ACE to develop a "clear framework for identifying and responding to museums and collections at risk."
- National Lottery funding for museums to focus on "capital projects with a significant impact" – examples of strategic areas to consider for funding explicitly include digital infrastructure and the digitisation of collections.

- Historic England to work with key stakeholders to “improve the long-term sustainability of the archaeological archives generated by developer-funded excavations.”

These recommendations provide opportunities for the funding of heritage science research and activities with impact on collections at risk and archaeological archives, improvements to digital infrastructure, digitisation and potentially the use of associated data, as well as address questions relating to placemaking and other issues of priority to government.

The Review also makes a series of recommendations to local authorities, which include “supporting museums in forming partnerships with local education, health and culture providers to improve public offer” – heritage science has a key role to play in enacting these priorities by contributing evidence, measuring impact and potentially being a major player in these partnerships as was explored in the 2017 NHSF event ‘[Health, Well-being and Cultural Heritage: Research, Evidence and Practice](#)’ (e.g. with regards to skills development and education, or the role of heritage in health and wellbeing).

Additionally, the document announces new funding sources:

“From 2018, [museums] will be eligible to apply for new open-access funds, ACE’s Grants for the Arts and Culture, worth over £200m per year and supporting a wide variety of organisational and engagement activities.”

- **Growing and diversifying audiences**

The Review places visitor data and impact at the very heart of the audience diversification process. Heritage science researchers could play a more significant role in analysing visitor data; this is an opportunity for impactful future research, and one that requires collaboration between institutions and a certain amount of strategic planning:

“Data is key to understanding and tracking audience diversity, but the museum sector is inconsistent in its collection, definitions, and use of it. Furthermore, the data that does exist is not collated and presented as an accessible set. It is vital that it should be used to best effect.”

The Review specifically recommends the use of new technology to analyse the way visitors engage with museums and improve “the impact they have on people’s lives.” It cites the examples of “the Natural History Museum and the National Gallery using mobile phone signals to understand how people move around the space; the Barnes Foundation in the US observing visitors using their audio guides and experimenting with wearable technology to encourage people to extend their visits, or the Battersea Arts Centre’s Creative Museums project piloting their ‘scratch’ method of iterative programmes and partnerships development.”

This evidence can be used to demonstrate the range of benefits that museums and heritage offer, an argument which in turn can help secure funding. This could be a growth area for heritage science research.

- **Dynamic collections curation and management**

The Review recognises that collections require proper expertise and care in order to fulfil their purpose. It urges the government and funding bodies to consider these issues, “including access to the right support for collections management and storage; coordinating the involvement of the

national museums right across the country; and developing a framework for identifying and responding to collections at risk.”

The issue of collections care is mentioned but not explicitly defined – in practice it does nevertheless include advances in conservation and preservation, digitisation and the digital enhancement of collection for innovative experiences, to find new ways to make them ever more accessible.

Museums are encouraged to share skills and infrastructure to tackle modern collections management concern – the opportunities are twofold:

- Developing partnerships between national and non-national museums:

Collections care being resource-intensive, there is potential for better sharing of skills, expertise and spaces between organisations. Collaboration will be further encouraged through “a new framework for partnership working between national and non-national museums” (see p.48).

- Innovative storage projects

Collections storage is a pressing issue which, if successfully overcome through collaboration, can greatly benefit research. Examples of such collaborative approaches include the open stores of [Kelvin Hall](#) in Glasgow, which offer public access as well as storage, and several [University of Cambridge museums](#) collaborating to store radioactive objects. As the Review points out, “there is more scope for such joint projects, for instance storage that is based regionally; storage that is owned by an individual museum offering space and selling other services such as conservation; or storage by type.”

There is also scope for articulating research, issues and priorities on the topic of storage, through publications and other visible work, in a bid to help secure more funding.

- **Contributing to placemaking and local priorities**

Museums can use their collections to support learning and education, promote better health, nurture a sense of local identity and contribute to a multitude of other local priorities. The Review recognises this potential and makes it a major strategic priority: “to encourage this work it is important that museums have and use consistent, statistically robust methods to measure economic and social impact.”

Heritage science research is able to both produce the evidence required to leverage investment in culture and use it to improve the museum offer to deliver on these priorities – in particular health and wellbeing¹, learning and skills development (see next priority below). Research in these areas, though currently not commonplace, is an opportunity to make an impact in the near future.

The Review notes that a “preferred method” for impact research, however, has yet to emerge, and better collaboration across the sector is needed: “reports use differing methodologies and look at different kinds of successes, producing results that are not comparable across museums and that in some cases are not considered statistically credible or robust. These factors create difficulties for funders, including ACE/HLF, foundations, and LAs trying to decide where to invest. It would be beneficial for the sector to develop agreed standards in order to direct these efforts more usefully.”

¹ See for instance the UCL-based [Museums on Prescription](#) project

Should heritage scientists choose to pursue such research, the first step would be to establish these standards through collaboration, in order to maximise the usefulness of the evidence produced.

- **Delivering cultural education**

The strategic review team recommends increasing the priority given to learning within organisation, with particular emphasis given to “formal education work” and supporting the curriculum. In 2016, Historic England published a [review](#) demonstrating how heritage science can support the National Curriculum in Key Stages 3, 4 and 5. It highlighted the opportunities for the use of heritage science topics to help develop STEM skills from an early stage through inclusion in science programmes.

The Review points out that difference in curriculum requirements between Local Authority-maintained schools (following the reformed National Curriculum, introduced Sept. 2014), and academies and free schools, presents both challenges and opportunities as museums must “respond to a more varied educational agenda in a current and relevant way”, requiring close working ties between schools and museums.

Interestingly, the Review reports a scarcity of data available to prove the educational benefits of “exposure to collections” and advocate a “more formal role for museums in education.” The heritage science community could use the Historic England research to be more vocal about the link between collections and learning/education, and to help generate the required evidence.

- **Developing leaders with appropriate skills and diversifying the workforce**

The Mendoza Review singles out two “pressing issues” regarding the museums workforce: diversity, and filling skills gaps in the sector.

It highlights a number of skill gaps in the museum sector: business and management skills, commercial awareness, the understanding of digital technology and ability to make use of new technologies to address new challenges, and skills related to partnership working and collaboration.

There is a very clear opportunity for heritage scientists to bridge the gap between museum and science workforces, and fill some of the skill gaps mentioned in both this Review and the Heritage Statement. Indeed the 2017 [Heritage Statement](#) argued that “the heritage sector ... suffers from shortages of skills and expertise in traditional crafts, **key historic environment specialisms** and business management, **including digital and information technology skills**” (p.21). The heritage science community, which does possess this skill set, is in a position to tackle these shortages through direct employment but also through partnerships and training opportunities, such as Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships or work-based internships.

Upcoming NHSF [research](#) into heritage science career pathways will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of career routes and how to better fill current skill gaps.

- **Digital capacity and innovation**

*“Digital capacity and innovation is an area where museums have been slower than other arts and cultural sectors to develop. Beginning with senior leadership, but encompassing **upskilling people** in numerous roles, there is **a need for greater understanding of the wide potential of digital in museums**. Examples include display and interpretation, collections, communications, data – and **the***

need for a strategic approach to embedding tools and technologies into every aspect of museums' work." (pp. 10-11).

Digital innovation is an area of significant opportunity for heritage science research and partnerships. As the museums seek to "use technology to embrace a more inclusive and participatory approach", they must overcome the sector-wide 'lag' in the use of digital technology.

The Review reports that museums tend to make little use of customer data. Evidence also suggests that "most museums neither think about their use of digital technology nor plan strategically. Two thirds of museums responding to the 2015 [*Digital Culture*] survey suggested that not having a senior leader with a specific remit for digital technology was a barrier to effective utilisation of technology."

The field of heritage science can help bridge this gap in the skillset and contribute to better practice regarding:

- Strategic use of digital technologies
- Digitising collections
- Improving communications and operations – including crowdfunding and borrowing ideas from the digital economy
- Audience engagement
- Generation and use of visitor data
- Innovation and collaboration

The DCMS [Digital Culture project](#) will "consider how culture and technology can work together to drive audience engagement, unleash the creative potential of digital solutions, and transform the capability of arts and heritage organisations." Areas of focus will include digital literacy in cultural organisations, and the preservation and archiving of digital cultural assets.

- **Working internationally**

The Mendoza Review reiterated the government's commitment to international partnerships, but also expressed the desire to see smaller, non-national museums and organisations included in these global exchanges, paving the way for new opportunities for international research collaborations.

Conclusion:

The Mendoza Review makes extensive recommendations for different parts of the sectors (DCMS, ALBs, LAs, national and non-national museums). It is expected that these will be taken forward over the coming months – in great part through a Museums Action Plan to be delivered by ACE and HLF. A partnership framework for national museums will provide additional guidance on working more strategically across the country.

This is a far-reaching review that is expected to catch the attention of both government bodies and museums – and, notably, its content makes very little mention of research. While this briefing note teases out where the opportunities for heritage science research are to be found, the challenge for the sector as a whole is to be more explicit about the role of research and its contributions to problem-solving and strategic priorities – from public and economic impact to placemaking and skills development.