

Ms Lindsey Pickles,
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
1st Floor
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17 January 2007

Dear Ms Pickles

Understanding the Future: Priorities for England's Museums

The Society of Museum Archaeologists (SMA) would like to respond to the paper *Understanding the Future: Priorities for England's Museums* produced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. We regard ourselves as a stakeholder because of our role as the leading body representing archaeologists working in museums.

The SMA was founded in 1975 and currently has a membership of around 300, comprising individuals and institutions throughout the United Kingdom. The Society exists to promote museum involvement in all aspects of archaeology and emphasise the unique contribution of museums to the essential unity of the archaeological profession; to promote greater public understanding of the archaeological past, and a fuller public appreciation of the importance of archaeology; to campaign for the acceptance of museums as guardians of a vital part of the nation's heritage and as the appropriate location for the storage and interpretation of all archaeological material; and to develop a coherent philosophy of the role of archaeologists in museums. The SMA is the parent body of the British Archaeology Subject Specialist Network and is a member of The Archaeology Forum.

In general the SMA welcomes the continuing interest of Government in the future of England's museums. However we feel that it is regrettable that the paper does not fully cover the needs of all museums within the sector and appears to have been written from the perspective of the nationals and the larger regional and urban services. It is a pity that the working group was not more diverse in its composition; for example, including someone from a small or medium-sized local authority museum where there are particular challenges in maintaining a good public service.

We would like to make the following specific comments on the DCMS's priorities over the next decade:

1a We support the aim of embedding museums into the delivery of education in every school in the country. The archaeological collections in museums and the museum archaeologists who care for them have key roles here, exemplified by the continuing importance placed on Roman Britain by the National Curriculum. Museum education services can only exist where they are founded on the specialist knowledge of curators and yet museum archaeologists and their museums remain under threat of cuts and closures as we have recently seen at Southampton. The DCMS must encourage and support the Museum Libraries and Archives Council in its advocacy role of demonstrating to governing bodies, particularly in the local authority sector, the significance and role of museum collections in learning about the human past.

1c It must be noted that the research potential of museum archaeological collections can only be unlocked where there are specialist curators who have the time to properly document their collections. This information, increasing available via the World Wide Web, can stimulate the curiosity of scholars and students and lead them to visit museums to study the collections for themselves. Again support for curatorship will be vital if the DCMS is to meet its priority with regard to museums as a research resource.

2d The particular significance of archaeology in the discussion of the role that museums can play in helping communities express and develop an understanding of their place in the world must not be overlooked. Archaeology provides a time depth to the issue of identity – what makes us who we are. For the vast majority of the period during which humans have existed archaeology is our sole source of evidence and even after the appearance of written sources archaeology can still provide valuable insights into past communities. For example, a study of Roman military and civilian tombstones demonstrates that Britain almost two thousand years' ago had individuals who originated from a wide area of Europe and even North Africa. Such evidence gives a different dimension to today's discussions of immigration.

3f Although the issue of disposal of collections is discussed in the main text this priority only refers to collecting. In our view the two are linked with specific regard to archaeological collections and therefore should be considered together. We can use the results of a detailed analysis of what museums hold in their stores to inform the debate on what museums should be collecting. This is an issue which the SMA and others in the archaeological community have been considering for some time and further work could be supported by Government with appropriate funding through the regional museum hubs and the subject specialist networks.

3g The most effective way 'to develop new collaborative approaches to sharing and developing collections and related expertise' is to ensure that the subject specialist networks are properly resourced.

4j The Society strongly supports the concept of continuing professional development. However, we remain concerned about the decline in connoisseurship. We are in danger of losing those traditional skills which characterised a museum curator – an affinity for and knowledge of objects. The time has come to attempt to reverse this trend and place much more emphasis on artefact skills through encouraging museum staff to attend training courses such as those run by the SMA. The Portable Antiquities Scheme is also making a real difference here and many of the current crop of Finds Liaison Officers are likely to become the museum curators of the future. We hope that Government will bear this in mind when setting its priorities in the forthcoming spending round as many of the DCMS's priorities can only be satisfactorily achieved with a strong curatorial workforce.

5l We support the development of deeper and lasting partnerships between the national museums and a broader range of regional partners. However, we wonder how much impact such partnerships will have on small to medium-sized services. The nationals must be encouraged to consider working with all registered museums, no matter what their size, in order to ensure equality of access to the resources of the nationals. We trust that Government will ensure that adequate resources are made available to the nationals in order that they may fully achieve this laudable aspiration.

5m We fear that this emphasis on the international role of museums may be potentially divisive within the sector as only the nationals and the larger services, especially art galleries, are likely to be affected by this aspiration. It is therefore important that any opportunity to extend international contacts more widely within the sector is taken and there may be a role for hub museums, who have appropriate expertise, assisting smaller services in their region.

The Society looks forward to the next stage of the process and would be willing to be represented at the proposed five seminars if requested to be present by the DCMS. We wish to place on record that we are willing to do everything possible to support the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in the preparation and achievement of the resulting action plan for England's museums.

Yours sincerely

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