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18

Submission to the Cultural Commission

I have been involved in the independent museum sector for the past four years, the latter two as chairman of the above centre and the views submitted here are mine alone and not necessarily that of my board. My impression is that the independent sector is in crisis. Lack of funding has meant that many museums in this area are severely understaffed and several trained curators in the sector have either lost their posts or had their terms and conditions radically reduced. Most museums are run by enthusiastic 70+ year old volunteers, with limited knowledge of either sound business systems or computer orientated equipment.

I have seen how the total budget from Central Government gets diluted, before for instance, the Scottish Museums Council receives its funding. I believe that out of a total of 70 million in 2002-2003, some 2.19 million found its way to the SMC. By the time that body finds its resources out of that amount, there is not a lot left to spread round the whole of the independent sector.

For this Commission to prove worthwhile, it has to show that this is not going to be merely a discussion forum for the great and the good of Edinburgh and Glasgow.- I have already contacted colleagues in other museums in my area and some have unfortunately given your letter of the 24th of August little consideration, with a general reaction of "what's the use".

There have been so many bright and shiny initiatives over the years, with little end result, that a general air of apathy seems to have clouded the sector. Sometimes the feeling is that it is more important to be seen to be doing something, rather than actually achieving anything!

For what it's worth here are some of my opinions

1. Education

Really important but to deliver this, there must be resources put into place and we must have the support of the local Education Authority. We have attempted to get local schools involved with projects on Pictish and local history with no support from our authority. One of their problems was finding funding for transport (we tried for funding but were knocked back) It is ironic that we can and do provide facilities for PhD students but not standard grades! Perhaps one or two teachers with an interest seconded to the museums sector would help?

2. Institutional infrastructure

Some of the national bodies need to get out more. Historic Scotland and The National Museums of Scotland are very good at targeting their market for their own sites but the independent sector really struggles to effectively promote itself. (Advertising costs are prohibitive) Even the Scottish Museums Council seems at times not to understand the problem - we keep getting letters from bright young things in Edinburgh telling us about some scheme or other involving our "staff" - my staff consists of one part-timer, twenty hours per week!

By the time we get child-protection, disability discrimination etc. policies up and running, there is not a lot of time left for further new initiatives! For instance how many potential volunteers have been put off by these new vetting procedures? A classic case of good intentions gone wrong since the very groups that this was designed to protect have ended up worse off.

3. Delivery of services and access

4. Marketing and promotion

These two categories can be considered together- it's simply a case of money.

I have always thought it strange that the general public, being used to getting into National Museums for nothing expect the same policy to prevail in our sector- most of them think that I get paid as well for all the hours which I put in here!

Whether it is in the recruiting of suitable staff to deliver services or publicise ones activities, we are restricted simply by what we can afford. I am certain that we cannot do this on our own for much longer and that we must look to sharing expertise and costs with others in the sector.

Marketing is very fragmented and not good value (HOST for instance). Too many companies seem more interested in making a profit for themselves rather than supporting the industry effectively. (Maybe SMC should be looking at providing a magazine on behalf of the independent sector to tell our story to the public and show them what we do provide.)

5. Encouraging creativity

Start them young! Make sure that in every primary school, there is time in the curriculum for the young to learn about their own history and culture (teach a man to fish and you feed him for life) We have run an "after-school club" with the local primary school and would be delighted to extend this type of activity to other schools in the area as I have said earlier with support from the Education Authority.

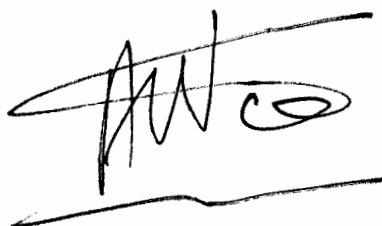
I am not too sure what to make of the phrase "cultural rights" In my past experience, when someone starts on banging on about their "rights", it usually means that someone else has an obligation to provide them and pick up the tab! At the end of the day we are talking about more resources to enable us to support our basic core activities before we start promising new ones.

Yes, there is funding available for new projects but at best they are break- even and do not address the basic problem which is **Revenue Funding** -There are only so many coffee mornings and raffles which we can run in a small rural area.

Unless we can find the means to put the independent sector onto a more secure financial footing, I really fear for its future and the country would be the poorer for its passing.

Anthony Watson

(Museum Chairman)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AW' followed by a flourish, underlined with a horizontal line.