

CULTURAL COMMISSION PHASE 2 CONSULTATION

NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF SCOTLAND RESPONSE

The National Museums of Scotland (NMS) is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Cultural Commission's Phase 2 consultation. We are in agreement with the submission by the Scottish Museums and Galleries Working Group. However, we would also like to add some specific comments of our own.

Our comments relate centrally to our role as a national cultural institution – questions 52-58 in the consultation. However they are also relevant to other sections such as Cultural Leadership and Cross Cutting and we hope that they will be considered in these contexts as well.

National Role

NMS believes organisations which have a national role should be recognised and funded as such. The National Collections Institutions, of which NMS is one, (with the National Galleries of Scotland, National Library of Scotland, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland) have a unique national role in holding major collections on behalf of the people of Scotland. NMS's role has two elements:

- To provide access to the collections of international and national importance in its care, which represent not only Scotland nationally, regionally and locally, but also cultures worldwide, science and technology and the natural world.
- To provide expertise, advice and support to the museums and cultural communities across Scotland.

NMS has in its care over 3 million objects, from many subject areas, collected over 200 years. They are the largest and most diverse museum collections in Scotland by a significant margin, and in a great many areas comprise the most representative concentration of material in Scotland for a particular subject area. Our 430 staff together represent a breadth and depth of expertise unique in Scotland – in research, collections management, conservation, learning, marketing, estates management, visitor and commercial operations.

It should, however, be noted that NMS currently has no formal responsibility set out in its founding legislation to support and enable the wider museum community. In our view this activity should be formalised.

Fundamental to our role is the quality and size of the NMS collections, and our knowledge of them. This enables NMS alone to combine intimate knowledge of museum and other collections across Scotland with a wide-ranging awareness of international developments and trends. Our singular relationship with the museums, educational, cultural and scientific communities involves many forms of partnership, on which we believe we should build for the future delivery of cultural entitlements:

- Strong, well presented central collections are a vital element in the maintenance and development of a positive national identity.

NMS's collections inform the public understanding of Scotland as a nation through the high quality displays at our sites and the learning resources and outreach that flow from them. Partnerships with organisations such as Learning Teaching Scotland are positioning the National Collections as a key resource within the 5-14 National Curriculum. Partnerships with local museums, such as that with Groam House Museum in Cromarty for the successful *Hugh Miller: Local Hero* exhibition in Cromarty (Miller's birthplace) in 2002/03, enables material from the National Collections to be seen more widely and to enrich a particular community's appreciation of its heritage. Other partnerships, such as with the National Piping Centre in Glasgow enable more of the National Collections to be viewed by the public.

- National institutions such as NMS have the capacity to put on major exhibitions of material from other national organisations from across the world, helping to position the new Scotland firmly and visibly within the international community. The recent NMS exhibition *Treasures from Tuscany*, which showed important material from the *Museo Nazionale* in Florence, is an example as is the forthcoming *Nicholas and Alexandra* exhibition from the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Our many international loans have a similar impact. NMS exhibitions travelling internationally promote an understanding of Scotland as a forward looking nation building on a rich history and a record of creativity and innovation. The NMS exhibition *Creating Scotland's Crafts* attracted 270,000 visits when it showed at the Smithsonian, Washington DC in 2003, in association with the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival.
- NMS provides a source of reputable, informed and current advice and information available nowhere else in Scotland. In effect, NMS is expected to be able to identify objects or sources on behalf of the Scottish museum community. This is achieved through a combination of staff knowledge, expertise and research, and participation in and awareness of, the international academic community. For many in the Scottish museum community NMS is the principal doorway to this wider world. NMS's silver collection, for example, is the largest and most representative collection of Scottish silver. It is not only an essential point of reference for all serious research on the subject, but has also served, with NMS's curatorial expertise, as a catalyst for the development of collections in non-national museums in Scotland. The expertise which we can provide, based on the National Collections, together with that of the National Galleries of Scotland and the National Library of Scotland, is key to the operation of the National Fund for Acquisitions, which provides grants to museums, galleries, libraries and archives throughout Scotland to acquire material.
- NMS supports community access to heritage through collaborative research and fieldwork. NMS's curatorial contribution to the excavation of a Bronze Age cemetery in Fife in 2003, and subsequent work on carbon dating of the finds, has formed an important element of the published excavation report. Following a decision by Fife Museums Service not to accept the excavation assemblage, this material has now been accepted

into the National Collections and is available for loan. Equally important are collaborative international projects which build relationships between Scotland and communities round the world. A collaboration between NMS, the Dogrib and Dene communities of the Canada's North West Territories, the University of Dundee and the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, is developing a travelling exhibition and website to allow worldwide access to Dogrib and Dene material in the care of NMS. By mutual agreement NMS will retain responsibility for the collection.

- NMS's collections are a resource for the whole of the museums community. Loans from the National Collections, well documented, conserved and presented, can add immeasurably to a community's experience of its heritage, and the understanding of visitors to the area. Kilmartin House Museum in Argyll is an award winning museum that enables visitors to explore and interpret the uniquely rich pre-historic landscape of the Kilmartin Glen. Kilmartin House Museum has almost no collections of its own, and many of the key objects on display are loans from the NMS archaeological collections. These include the Glebe Cairn vessel, which was excavated from a cairn that can be seen from the museum itself. Last year NMS lent over 1,500 objects to over 100 venues in Scotland. There were 140,000 visits to special exhibitions in Scotland where material from the National Collections was on loan.
- NMS holds internationally important scientific collections, a geological and zoological record which is the basis for an active research programme, much of which is undertaken in collaboration with other organisations in the UK and internationally. This activity illustrates the wider role of museums in creating knowledge across many disciplines, and for NMS in particular in maintaining a role as a centre of scientific excellence for Scotland. Our scientific research has many practical applications, for example, in supporting conservation and environmental projects. Marine biologists in NMS, in partnership with the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Association for Marine Science, Natural Environment Research Council, Fisheries Research Services and various universities, are involved in major initiatives to evaluate the health of our seas. The studies involve examination of the fauna of the deep Faroe-Shetland Channel, Irminger Sea and Rockall Trough and inshore waters such as the Firth of Forth and the thirty designated marine Special Areas of Conservation. NMS taxonomic expertise is aiding in the identification and classification of the animals found and NMS is the repository for the specimens – thus making the survey truly scientific by preserving the material for future re-evaluation, and enabling environmental agencies to discharge their statutory responsibilities.

National Organisations in the Cultural Infrastructure

NMS believes that the National Collections organisations, each of which has a national role, should be funded directly by the Scottish Executive and should report to Scottish Ministers. We are not simply arguing against change here. We believe that the present structure satisfies 2 key criteria for effectiveness which are:

- Direct accountability to Ministers for national outcomes, expressed either in Ministerial objectives or in high level policy statements such as the Partnership Agreement for a Better Scotland.
- Stringent levels of public scrutiny through continuation of NDPB status. This includes financial reporting, Best Value, performance and financial management reviews, public appointments process for Board membership.

Scope for Further Collaboration between National Institutions

NMS already operates a network of partnerships with other national institutions and organisations. They are key to the provision of the widest possible access to the collections held by each, add value to the quality of cultural services in Scotland and are an important vehicle for the promotion of tourist visits to Scotland and for promoting Scotland internationally. Recent examples include NMS's collaboration with the National Galleries of Scotland for the Titian exhibition, where 25% of the items on display came from the NMS collections. There are opportunities and plans to do more of this, such as the major joint NMS/ National Galleries of Scotland/National Library of Scotland touring exhibition being undertaken for the 2007 Year of Highland Culture.

NMS is also collaborating with other cultural institutions to achieve operational savings and efficiencies, within the Efficient Government framework. In fact there already exists a significant amount of collaboration including:

- NGS leases part of NMS's main storage site at Granton and has constructed a new store for its collections. NMS and NGS share security and other operational costs for the site.
- NMS, NGS and RBGE jointly employ a Staff Assistance Officer.
- NMS and NLS have formed a consortium to procure new arrangements for payroll services.
- NMS and NGS share a post responsible for Paper Conservation and share expertise in conservation (NGS provides condition reporting on NMS paintings, for example, while NMS advises on NGS textiles).

Further significant initiatives looking a wide range of operational efficiencies are under active consideration.

NMS does not believe that there is a credible case for amalgamation of two or more of the National Collections institutions. An amalgamation of NMS and NGS might appear to be one possible option. The following arguments have, at times, been put forward for this:

- The creation of a single organisation with responsibility for Scotland's museums and fine art collections, in order to promote closer collaboration in the provision of public services.
- A view that amalgamation could produce savings from merging back office and other functions.

In fact it is far from clear that there would be significant savings. Both bodies spend significantly less on administrative functions than the national museums and galleries

in England, and there is little evidence of fat to trim. The direct costs of merger, particularly in senior staff compensation, would be substantial. Further, there already exists far more collaboration than is commonly thought, with further initiatives in progress. NMS believes that strengthening this approach offers the best balance of operational efficiency and the delivery of effective services to the public.

In addition it is not clear what would be the public benefit of such a change, barring any small scale savings. Merger would create a very large organisation within which it would be extremely challenging to create a clear strategic and operational focus. Both NMS and NGS already have significantly wider remits than their counterparts in England. For example NMS encompasses collection areas equivalent to the Science Museum, Natural History Museum, V & A, Imperial War Museum and the British Museum. NGS covers collection areas equivalent to the National Gallery, Tate Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery. In our view, creating a significantly larger organisation with an even broader range of collection responsibilities is very unlikely to deliver any public benefits and in fact bears a significant risk of being to the detriment of public services.

Conclusion

Our key points are as follows:

- NMS believes organisations which have a national role should be recognised and funded as such.
- NMS's believes that there is a strong case that the National Collections Institutions should continue to operate as centres of national and international excellence for the benefit of Scotland.
- The national role of the National Collections Institutions to provide advice and expertise across the cultural community should be more formally recognised.
- We believe that the National Collections Institutions will operate most effectively within a new cultural infrastructure, as Non Departmental Bodies reporting directly to Ministers and funded directly by the Scottish Executive.
- We do not consider that the small scale potential costs savings or other efficiencies which might be gained through merging two or more of the national collections institutions will provide any real public benefits and in fact may well lead to a deterioration of service.

24 January 2005.