

## **Museums Association: Collections 2030**

### **Icon Response**

**15/11/2018**

Icon, The Institute of Conservation, welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Museums Association's consultation on the next decade of collections management. Icon endorses the overall aims of Collections 2030 to unlock the full potential of collections and to encourage museums to think strategically about their management and use. However, Collections 2030 needs to be more inclusive of the range of disciplines represented by museums and celebrate the potential of conservation and heritage science to deliver public benefit.

Icon is a registered charity and the professional body for the conservation of our cultural heritage. Icon raises awareness of the cultural, social and economic value of caring for heritage and champions high standards of conservation. We represent nearly 3,000 individuals and organisations comprising professional conservators, heritage scientists and many others who share a commitment to improving understanding of and access to our cultural heritage.

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### **1. What type of collections work should museums prioritise in order to deliver public benefit over the next decade?**

Icon welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Museum Association's consultation on the next decade of collections management.

Icon endorses the overall aims of the research project to unlock the full potential of collections and to encourage museums to think strategically about their management and use. For this to be achieved, Collections 2030 needs to be more inclusive of the range of disciplines represented by museums. The current draft underplays the role of conservation and heritage science in fulfilling museums' purpose and delivering public benefit.

Conservators and heritage scientists enable museums to fulfil their core responsibilities as custodians of material culture. They preserve collections for current and future generations and facilitate physical and intellectual access. This infrastructure enables museums to deliver benefit through more outward facing activities such as curation, interpretation, learning and public engagement. However, conservation and heritage science are not just enablers of other museum practice, they are conveyers of public benefit themselves, holding potential in terms of knowledge transfer, skills development, participation, health and wellbeing.

The success of collections work will rely on having a skilled and sustainable workforce. Ensuring museum professionals are equipped with the skills and experience to deliver the core mission of museums should be a priority for the next decade. The workforce will need to be diverse and fully reflect the society that it aims

to benefit. Environmental sustainability must underpin all collections work, as museums cannot be removed from the environmental context in which they exist.

## **2. How can funders and policy-makers support your priority areas for collections?**

A national strategic approach to conservation in the museum sector is overdue. Single reports and recommendations cannot address issues relating to the long-term sustainability of collections care in a meaningful way. Local and regional initiatives provide excellent benefits, but these are only transitory if carried out on an ad-hoc basis rather than within a framework of improvement.

UK governments should support national and local public funding for museums and their activities. Long-term and consistent funding is needed for conservation and heritage science projects to maximise their potential to deliver public benefit. Icon calls on governments and funders to explicitly recognise the vital importance of museums and collections to society. They should act as vocal advocates and foster awareness of the value that collections deliver. A greater public profile for the sector can result in alternative funding streams, supporting financial resilience.

The government needs to ensure frictionless access to international workers after Brexit. Any visa system needs to be based on skills required as opposed to salary levels. The Migration Advisory Committee's recommendations of a £30k minimum salary for visas would exclude essential professional skilled roles in museums and heritage. Icon's research showed that the average salary for a full-time professional conservator in 2012/13 was £28,000 and the median was £26,000.<sup>1</sup> The inability to source international colleagues could aggravate existing skills gaps and diminish diversity.

We urge governments to promote and protect cultural education. Exposure to arts and creative subjects is of critical importance to inspiring the museum professionals and visitors of the future. A balanced curriculum is needed so that young people can develop a range of skills and abilities.

## **3. How can museums use their collections to empower people and communities? What would this look like in your museum?**

The significant potential of collections to empower is rightfully acknowledged in the discussion document. Icon agrees that a willingness to look at collections through new perspectives and a critical lens will be key to maximising this potential. Equally important will be inviting people to engage with all aspects of a museum's work.

Engaging 'source' communities in the conservation of their heritage can bring 'non-traditional' visitors to museums and trigger debate about how a society's material culture is best cared for. It can reveal new stories and develop a sense of belonging and identity amongst participants.

Museum staff can support communities and people in developing new skills through engaging with collections and their work. Conservators possess a range of scientific and crafts skills and knowledge of art and social history, architecture and changing lifestyles and technologies. Passing these skills and knowledge on – through volunteering opportunities, events, learning programmes etc. – can nurture wellbeing and build confidence.

Museums can empower by inspiring individuals and groups. Sharing information discovered through conservation and heritage science can influence makers and inspire ideas, products, services and the creative application of new tools. Conservation inherently promotes the sustainable use of resources, reinforcing the need to care for, rather than replace, assets. Promoting awareness of this core mission can empower people to live sustainably in an age of climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://icon.org.uk/system/files/documents/conservation\\_labour\\_market\\_intelligence\\_2012-13\\_0.pdf](https://icon.org.uk/system/files/documents/conservation_labour_market_intelligence_2012-13_0.pdf)

**4. What needs to change within museums to enable collections to be used for social impact?**

Icon agrees with the need to move away from a culture of “siloes working” and encourages museums to look beyond established roles for delivering social impact and realise the potential of all their duties to contribute to society.

Conservation and heritage science can be powerful tools for delivering public benefit. Museums should discourage the longstanding perception of conservation as a barrier or limit to access. Conservators should be given the opportunity to play a more visible role within public-facing activities – in exhibitions, public programs, study tours etc. – and supported to think about the ways that the objects in their care might engage wider audiences.

A museum workforce equipped with strong skills in collaboration, communication, leadership and strategic thinking will facilitate a move from isolated working. Support, opportunities and encouragement to develop these skills will be necessary.

**5. How can museums make the most of their collections in an era of short-term project work?**

Museums and funders should ensure that projects are delivered within a structured framework that sets out procedures for measuring impact and supporting sustainability after project completion. Social media can ensure a legacy for short-term projects as it allows for content to be published at a low cost that can continue to engage the public in the project even after it has finished.

**6. What approaches are needed to decolonise collections over the next decade? What would this look like in your museum?**

Museums will need to be brave, innovative and open to new perspectives. They should face issues honestly and invite diverse communities to share their stories of collections.

Conservators are experienced in considering objects without bias based on provenance and can make meaningful contributions to debates on decolonisation. Conservation principles provide a robust ethical perspective and acknowledge the history of an object is made up of interlocking but equally important factors that can be mapped and initiate discussion. The complexity around decolonisation mirrors the type of complexity that often must be considered during the decision-making process of remedial conservation.

**7. How can we achieve the best balance between internal and external input in contemporary collecting?**

NA

**8. How can museums continue to collect in an era of reduced funding?**

Crowdfunding could be considered as a way to engage external funders and visitors. In 2017, the Museum of London successfully used a web-based crowd-funding campaign to finance the Re-Dress of the Pleasure Garden exhibition. The funding enabled the conservation and display of several period dress pieces that had previously not been on display before.

**9. How can museums take more risks with collections? What would this look like in your museum?**

Icon agrees that access should be weighed against conservation considerations as the public benefit of collections relies on their accessibility. Conservators and heritage scientists can play a central role in developing nuanced approaches to preservation as they are well informed about the risks to collections and methods of mitigation. For example, conservators will be equipped to inform museums on ways of transporting objects for loans and tours and selecting objects for handling. They can also advise on objects on open display. Conservators have experience of the types of materials that must be displayed in

showcases or behind barriers and can propose ways of exhibiting objects more openly without risk to the assets.

#### **10. How can museums improve the knowledge they hold about their collections over the next decade?**

Knowledge and access to information is an important aspect of collections work, particularly how and where information is stored, who has access to it and how it can be shared. The sector could invest in new digital models that create systems, which can structure information about all aspects of the museum and its collections.

Investment in research and the workforce is essential. Conservators and heritage scientists discover information in their investigations of objects that contribute to our understanding of collections. The public benefit of supporting museum professionals to foster and develop their specialist skills and expertise should be widely promoted. Equally imperative will be sustaining the knowledge museums already hold. Embedding succession planning in working practices can help ensure knowledge is not lost through staff retirement or turnover. The knowledge held by colleagues should be documented, accessible and known about.

Museums could look to pool resources and develop partnerships and collaborations with universities, other museums, heritage organisations and private practitioners to bring external knowledge in. Visitors, volunteers and local communities are also a valuable resource and knowledge-pooling can be a low-cost and effective way of improving understanding. Requesting input on collections through online platforms can engage a wider community of collectors, students and researchers who may be eager to engage in volunteer activities or may have conducted specific research on the topic in question.

#### **11. How can museum staff be empowered to undertake ethical disposal?**

Training and explicit guidance will be vital to empowering staff to make decisions confidently. Conservators and heritage scientists can share their decision-making skills and experience with others.

#### **12. How can museums make the case for the public benefit of their non-display collections?**

By being transparent about what is in stores and promoting the research value of non-display collections. Providing enhanced public access – for example through digitisation projects, tours, learning programmes, partnerships with universities that support research projects using stored collections, events and public-facing stores – can demonstrate public benefit. Museums should consult with and look to the example set by the archives and libraries sector. Archives and special collection libraries consist entirely of stored collections, but they provide great public benefit through searchable catalogues and public research rooms.

Debates on which objects are in store or on display should be frank, inclusive and transparent for future generations who may have different views on strategies. Conservators and heritage scientists could be consulted on non-display assets that have been placed in storage due to conservation concerns and on whether new technologies – e.g. light filters, smart glass, LEDs – now allow for them to be displayed.

It will be important for museums to articulate and promote their role as custodians of cultural heritage to increase public understanding of why collections are retained and stored in the first place. Those working closely with collections hold potential as 'collections ambassadors' to advocate for the value of objects held by museums. Conservation remains broadly under-recognised and misunderstood by the public and there is a real urgency for the collections sector to respond to this.

This response was written in consultation with the Icon Policy Advisory Panel.

**Links to further information:**

Icon website [www.icon.org.uk](http://www.icon.org.uk)

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