



# UCL

## COLLECTIONS FOR PEOPLE

MUSEUMS' STORED  
COLLECTIONS AS A  
PUBLIC RESOURCE



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# COLLECTIONS FOR PEOPLE

**MUSEUMS' STORED  
COLLECTIONS AS A  
PUBLIC RESOURCE**

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Published by UCL Institute of Archaeology

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ISBN 978-0-905853-44-4

## Abbreviations used

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AHRC	Arts & Humanities Research Council
AMC	Area Museum Council
AMS	Area Museum Service
DCMS	Department of Culture Media & Sport
HLF	Heritage Lottery Fund
ICOM	International Council of Museums
LGA	Local Government Association
MA	Museums Association
MDA	Museum Documentation Association
MGC	Museums & Galleries Commission
MLA	Museums Libraries & Archives Council
UCL	University College London

Research archive and supplementary material

The research archive will be held in University College London. The author should be contacted in the first instance.

UCL - Additional information and research data:

[www.ucl.ac.uk/storedcollections](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/storedcollections)

The Collections Trust – ongoing work on collections access and use, through Collections Link

[www.collections\\_link.org.uk/use\\_collection/](http://www.collections_link.org.uk/use_collection/)

The Museums Association – Effective Collections programme

[www.museumsassociation.org/](http://www.museumsassociation.org/)

## Acknowledgements

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Grateful thanks are due to the following,  
for assisting the research in important ways:

### For funding

Arts & Humanities Research Council  
Museums Libraries & Archives Council  
Collections Trust  
Pilgrim Trust

### Help in kind

Museums Association  
ICON: the Institute of Conservation

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### Design and Layout

Angela Scott, UCL Media Services

### Printed by

Stephen Austin & Sons Ltd  
[www.stephenaustin.co.uk](http://www.stephenaustin.co.uk)

Images as credited

Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery



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Photo: M Thomson

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research was prompted by calls for more effective use of museums' stored collections. Undertaken from UCL it was supported by the AHRC, MLA, the Collections Trust, The Pilgrim Trust and the Museums Association. Results are based on surveys of museums in England and Wales and of collections users.

Establishing the resource base, the size and nature of collections, is no easy task, since definitions and statistics vary greatly. Nevertheless we do now know a great deal. The current project does not contradict the 1999 DOMUS figure of 200 million items in collections (**Section 2**).

The number of collections visitors or users is low overall, ranging in the sample from 0 to 14,000 a year. 20 per cent of museums in the sample reported 400 or more users a year: the whole range of museum types is represented among these (**Sections 2 and 3**).

52 per cent of museums reported increasing public demand. Only seven museums noted a decrease in recent years. 74 per cent of museum respondents thought that collections were insufficiently used.

Factors associated with having more users were mainly those influenced by management priorities and motivation: publicising access; providing for groups as well as for individuals; having a designated or national collection; and (only weakly) being a national or university museum. Factors not associated included, surprisingly, the number of staff, receipt of a collections related grant, accreditation or registration, and type of collection (**Section 2**).

Research with users suggested that this service provision is currently haphazard and patchy. Users, especially the interested public, too seldom experience access to the 200 million items in the collections of English and Welsh museums as a public right and a valid service in which museums should excel (**Section 5**).

Less used collections that are often stored off site include, in particular, geology and ethnographic collections. Ethnography collections do appear to be especially inaccessible and little used. The most commonly reported collections use was research, but education, social benefit, social identity, creative uses and sheer enjoyment were all noted as well (**Section 6**).

Digital issues were important. Users mainly preferred to find information about collections from online listings, but museums recorded that most enquiries were dealt with by individual contact: telephone, email or letter (**Section 7**).

In practice, there are different levels of collections engagement, from open public or group visits to special experiences through programmes to pivotal experiences for a few – sometimes delivering important social benefits. There is a corresponding range of provision, from open stores to group tours to programmes and events to voluntary projects in collaboration with external specialist organisations (**Section 8**).

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 1

#### Enjoyment and social benefit

Loan box service – develop inreach use – many groups such as guides, school holiday clubs etc could come in and use the loan boxes when they are not needed for schools service during terms.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The results and findings suggest some very practical measures for consideration by museums, funding and strategic bodies.

- Museums should recognise that their collections are public resources and hence that they have an obligation to make them publicly available. They should heed the evidence of increasing public demand for access to them.
- Standards for accreditation should include benchmarks for collections access and use. Collections related grants should require evidence of improved access to be produced.
- Some of the museums found to be making good use of their collections had appointed a collections access officer whose role it was to liaise with local groups and facilitate collections programmes and uses. While not found to be essential this does demonstrate commitment.
- Users want museums to publish what is in their collections, preferably online, at least at collection description level.
- Museums should tell users how to visit or access collections in store. They should provide examples to give people ideas on how they could be used.
- To encourage the use of collections, museums should advertise and market their availability, as they do other services.
- Museums should provide collections access activities as a service to other organisations who would find this useful.
- Museums should mainstream collaboration and partnership working rather than allow these to continue to be peripheral or exceptions to the rule.
- Curators may need to consider the focus of their role: is it on exhibitions and office based activities such as enquiry answering, or on generating and facilitating greater use of collections? This could fit with developing greater knowledge of collections. **(Section 9)**.

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 2 Enjoyment

Issue people with random 'Meet your object' cards naming a specific object, and organise an event where they bring their cards along and meet their object.



Southampton  
1912-13

# INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND RESEARCH

Suzanne Keene  
and  
Alice Stevenson

## Context and research

Collections in UK museums grew almost exponentially in the latter half of the 20th century,<sup>1</sup> due to fundamental social and economic factors coupled with public and private support for museums as institutions. Technological development rendered past skills and trades redundant; as Britain became richer consumerism increased dramatically; the development of towns and cities gave rise to archaeological explorations; and understanding the natural world became an imperative. Museums did their best to reflect all these developments in their collections.

Yet, the perception has been that museum collections, mostly maintained at public expense, are under-used as a resource. The Museums Association's 2005 report, *Collections for the future*,<sup>2</sup> together with press comments and books such as *Treasures on earth* (2002)<sup>3</sup> and the forerunner to this report, *Fragments of the World* (2005),<sup>4</sup> brought this issue into sharp focus. The research reported here set out to understand the main parameters to do with collections, and access and use of them:

- **What is the size and nature of the collections as a resource?** How are they distributed, geographically and among different types of collection? How do they vary in size and type?
- **How much are different types of collection used by people other than museum staff?** What sort of people use collections? What do they use them for: research, teaching and learning, creative activities, visits for enjoyment such as store tours?

- **How do users perceive this service?** Do museums actively market collections access? Do they publicise what is in their collections?
- **How do museums provide for collections use?** What are the factors associated with greater use of collections? What do museums see as the barriers to more use?

## Policy background

In 1998, at its general meeting, the Museums Association agreed a revised definition of museums: "Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment" which strongly implies access beyond exhibiting selected objects. The DCMS 1999 policy document, *Museums for the many*, included standards specifically for "providing appropriate means of access to reserve collections and stored items for the general public as well as scholars" and "the communication of staff's knowledge about the collections" as well as those more familiar, for widening access for those with physical, social or cultural disadvantages.<sup>5</sup>

## Awareness and actions

There has been enthusiastic action on addressing access for the full range of people, but access to collections has been largely overlooked. Although the term 'collections access' is frequently used in bids for funding, in this research sample there was no association between grants obtained and the numbers of users (see Section 3.6, below). Access to collections does not appear in the requirements for accreditation, benchmarks have not been

<sup>1</sup> Keene, S. 2002. *Managing conservation in museums*. Butterworth Heinemann. p. 14. The collections of the Science Museum grew at a similar pace.  
<sup>2</sup> Wilkinson, H. 2005. *Collections for the future*. Museums Association.  
<sup>3</sup> Thomson, K. 2002. *Treasures on earth: museums, collections and paradoxes*. Faber.  
<sup>4</sup> Keene, S. 2005. *Fragments of the world: the uses of museum collections*. Elsevier.  
<sup>5</sup> DCMS 1999, *Museums for the many: Standards for museums and galleries to use when developing access policies*. Department of Culture Media and Sport. pp. 6, 8.

## Use Study 1 – A local authority museum website

### Collections Resource Centre

Want to find out more about our collections?

Ever wondered about objects not on display?

Fancy a peek behind the scenes?

Yes! Then the Collections Resource Centre at [The] Art Gallery is the place for you.

[The local authority] Arts and Museum Service have a fantastic range of objects in our collection. From paintings to sculpture with a detour to Roman glass, Japanese ivories, archaeology, ceramics dolls and more!

Whether you want to do specific research or just look at some of the objects that are not usually on display, then get in touch to arrange a visit. Or why not come to one of our Open Days?

Source: website

# Use study

developed and no funding body as yet sets performance indicators or targets for these services.

Awareness that there is an issue has been growing, however, with some adverse press comment about the quantity of collections in store. Following from the MA's (Museums Association) published reports in 2005 and 2007,<sup>6</sup> it set up projects focusing on encouraging and facilitating collections loans between museums, the ethical approach to disposals and measures to improve collections knowledge. MLA London has commissioned a report into how physical access to collections is recorded.

## Definitions

The terms 'access' and 'stored collections' have various meanings. In this report, 'access' means physical access to collections by visitors or users who are not the staff of the museum and 'stored collections' means all those objects that are not on display, not on loan, and not in a teaching or handling collection, including those that are in open stores normally visitable by the public. We do not include 'intellectual access', that is, enquiries replied to or measurements of online access to collections information.

## This research

All museums in England and Wales were invited to complete a questionnaire, online or paper if they did not have that facility, in summer 2007. The survey resulted in a sample representative of the general museum demographics, that provided the basis for statistically significant analysis. A number of museums were visited to provide the Use Studies. Low use examples are included as well as higher use instances. Research with users took place in early 2008 and is described below in that section. The Ideas Collection was largely generated through a publicly accessible online input page.

Primarily a research project of UCL Museum Studies, the work was supported by the AHRC and organisations with an interest in the uses of collections: the MLA, the Collections Trust (formerly the MDA), and the Pilgrim Trust. ICON: the Institute of Conservation and the Museums Association provided help in kind.



<sup>6</sup> Wilkinson, H. 2005. *Collections for the future*. Museums Association. MA 2007. *Making collections effective*. Museums Association.

Alice Stevenson

This research is set in the context of the general distribution of museums and their collections in the UK. Reports such as the Museums Libraries & Archives Council's (MLA) Digest of Statistics give the impression that the sector has been comprehensively accounted for. In fact no definitive statistics exist, despite several attempts at a national and regional level to address the issue, a situation that has been lamented by those who have previously reviewed this area.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.1 FINDINGS

### Surveys of museums

Available surveys are variable in their quality, extent and purpose, making comparisons problematic. Moreover, they were conducted at different points over the last decade, for different purposes and by different administrative bodies. Many are several years old, and additionally, a one-to-one equivalence of museum and collection is not a given. The sheer diversity of collections and subject specialisms means that generalizing across the sector is not just difficult, but questionable. These complications suggest that reviewing the distribution of museums and collections is not a simple matter of straightforward 'spreadsheet accountability'.<sup>8</sup> Rather, there are fundamental interpretive assumptions on how museums and collections are defined, rendering the investigation into the UK's museum profile a debate as much as an administrative exercise.

### The sample demographics

The distribution of museums in the survey sample, as judged by type, is comparable to that in the 1999 DOMUS report and to the MLA's 2005 *Museum statistics in England*.<sup>9</sup>

### Quantifying the collections

Comparing results from three sources, the 24 Hour Museum, Cornucopia and the 1999 Domus survey, demonstrates the variability of available statistics. This is largely due to different ways of categorising collections and varying sample sizes.

The current research cannot confirm, but does not contradict, the suggestion based on DOMUS that 200 million items is a minimum for collections in England and Wales.

## 2.2 DISCUSSION

A comprehensive statistically accountable overview of the nature of museum storage and access across the UK is a task far beyond the scope of the current project.

It is clearly evident from reviewing the national, regional, and subject based attempts to profile museums and collections that the complexity and diversity of the sector is not easily represented by quantitative measures. Despite this we do already know a great deal about what collections museums hold, and where they are. Rather than quantifying further, an in-depth consultation process of the contexts and attitudes that shape the statistics might generate a greater awareness of access and storage that in turn would lead to better information about collections and their uses.

In the context of this current research, these complexities make it impossible to attempt to quantify collections use versus number of objects. This would anyway immediately beg the question, is more intensive and longer 'use' by a few people (researchers) better or worse than more fleeting use by many, for instance in store tours? Even in exhibitions, visitors often spend seconds rather than minutes (certainly not hours!) looking at a showcase.

Many of the reports discussed below would assist the wider users of collections, yet most have been funded, conducted and disseminated for the museum profession, as a basis for policy making and decision on inter-museum activity or disposal.<sup>10</sup>

If there is a connection between collection use and knowledge of what is in a collection, as seems likely, then such gazetteers may be of equal benefit to the wider public, including researchers. As it stands, most of the information is difficult to locate, even when it is available online.

<sup>7</sup> Davies, S. 2005. The knowledge gap. *Museums Journal*, December 2005. pp.14–15.

Paine, C. 2000. *Stewardship*. Heritage Lottery Fund & Re:source. 5.

Selwood, S. 2001. Profile of museums and galleries. In S. Selwood (ed.), *The UK Cultural Sector*, Policy Studies Institute. pp. 342-359.

<sup>8</sup> Knell, S. 2004. Altered values: searching for a new collecting, in S. Knell (ed.), *Museums and the future of collecting*, second edn., Ashgate, pp. 1–46, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Carter, S., Hurst, B., Kerr, R., Taylor, E., & Winsor, P. 1999. *Museum focus: facts and figures on museums in the UK*. Issue 2; Matty, S. 2005. *Museum statistics in England. Report to the Expert Meeting on statistics and performance indicators for European museums*, 13–14 October 2005, Berlin, MLA.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas, R. 1998. Taking stock, *Museums Journal*, July, 1998, 30–31.

## Use Study 2 – A small museum serving a large diaspora audience, focusing its resources

With a total staff of five the small museum represents the history of an important diaspora. It has a tiny collection of 3D objects but extensive archival, photographic and oral history collections and recordings. There is great interest in and demand to access this material both in the UK and abroad with the growth of interest in family history. The museum is also part of the Moving Here project, and this too has encouraged use.

The museum had come to an arrangement with the local Record Centre to house most of the archive. In order to cope with demand it was open for researchers on three days during the summer, when most users visited.

Source: Research archive study 1

## THE EVIDENCE

### 2.3 THE NUMBER OF MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES: WHAT IS KNOWN

#### General data sources

The number of museums in the UK can be inferred from several sources, including the MA's Museums and Galleries Yearbook, the national Accreditation scheme, the DOMUS report,<sup>11</sup> and online resources such as Cornucopia<sup>12</sup> and the 24 Hour Museum<sup>13</sup>. The picture provided by such sources is not, however, consistent. For example, the MA website estimates that across the UK museums number between

'...2000 and 2500, depending what you include.'<sup>14</sup>

In comparison the 24 Hour Museum has over 3000 entries. Clearly, the manner in which 'museum' is defined impacts quantification.<sup>15</sup> The International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition of a museum is far broader as it includes institutions holding collections of live plant and animal specimens.<sup>16</sup> This explains, in part, the higher number of institutions recorded by the 24 Hour Museum. For the purposes of the present study, the MA's definition is appropriate.

At the UK level few surveys have been attempted. A UK-wide database of museums, Museums UK, was envisaged by the Museums Association in the early 1980s. The low response rate and complexity of the resulting data, however, limited its validity.<sup>17</sup> In the mid-1990s a similar survey, aimed at constructing the DOMUS database, was conducted under the auspices of the MGC.<sup>18</sup> The report was heavily criticised,<sup>19</sup> but this was from the point of view of statistical validity, a questionable standard given the complexity of museum provision and hence data. Classification based upon the Museum Accreditation Scheme can affect the

reported number of museums. For instance, while MLA South East claims that with over 300 museums it has '...the highest number of museums within an English region',<sup>20</sup> MLA South West reports that it encompasses 510 museums.<sup>21</sup> This is because the South East has, at the time of writing, more accredited/registered museums than the South West. Yet even this distinction is complicated by intermediate 'provisionally registered' statuses.<sup>22</sup>

Currently, the MA's annual yearbook is the largest and most comprehensive listing, and is kept current through annual and ongoing updating.<sup>23</sup> It is used to construct MLA's annual Digest of Statistics for English institutions and other statistical summaries of the sector.<sup>24</sup> Care, however, is required in compiling figures from this source since it includes museum services covering a number of museums. Therefore, museum numbers, particularly local authority funded museums, may be overestimated as a result of double counting.<sup>25</sup>

#### The demographics and the research sample

Museums may usefully be differentiated by their main funding or administrative body, whether government agency, charitable trust, local authority or other source. Definitions of these are not clear-cut. This is especially the case where trusts have service level agreements or other funding arrangements with a local authority. Moreover, defining a museum as a local authority one disguises a wide variety of administrative structures and forms.<sup>26</sup> The MLA's figures, constructed on the basis of entries in the MA yearbook,<sup>27</sup> provide a broad demographic model against which to judge the how representative is the sample in this survey (Fig. 2.1). Another comparison relevant to the current research is by numbers of collections, and this is reported in Section 2.5, below.

<sup>11</sup> Carter, S., Hurst, B., Kerr, R., Taylor, E., & Winsor, P. 1999. *Museum focus. Facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 2. MGC.*

Coles, A., Hurst, B., & Winsor, P. 1998b. *Museum focus. Facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 1. MGC.*

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cornucopia.org.uk/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.museumsassociation.org/>

<sup>15</sup> Ambrose, T. & Paine, C. 1994. Some definitions of 'museum', in G. Kavanagh, ed., *Museum provision and professionalism*, Routledge, pp. 15-16.

<sup>16</sup> <http://icom.museum/definition.html>

<sup>17</sup> Wright, M., Selwood, S., Creaser, C., & Davies, J. E. 2001. *UK museums retrospective statistics project.* Loughborough University, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Carter, S., Hurst, B., Kerr, R., Taylor, E., & Winsor, P. 1999. *Museum focus. facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 2. MGC.*

<sup>19</sup> Carrington, L. 1999. Data Delivery. *Museums Journal*, January 1999, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> MLA South East 2007. *Key facts.* MLA South East.

<sup>21</sup> SWMLAC 2004. *Fact file.* MLA South West.

<sup>22</sup> MLA 2004. *Accreditation standard. The accreditation scheme for museums in the United Kingdom.* p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> MA 2008 (annually). *Museums & galleries yearbook.* Museums Association.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. Carter, S., Hurst, B., Kerr, R., Taylor, E., & Winsor, P. 1999. *Museum focus. facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 2;*

Matty, S. 2005. *Museum statistics in England. Report to the Expert Meeting on statistics and performance indicators for European museums, 13-14 October 2005, Berlin, MLA.*

<sup>25</sup> Wright, M., Selwood, S., Creaser, C., & Davies, J. E. 2001. *UK museums retrospective statistics project.* Loughborough University, p. 9

<sup>26</sup> Lawley, I. 2003. Local authority museums and the modernizing government agenda in England, *Museum and Society*, Vol. 1, no. 2. pp. 75-86.

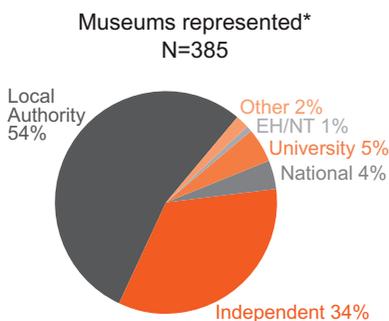
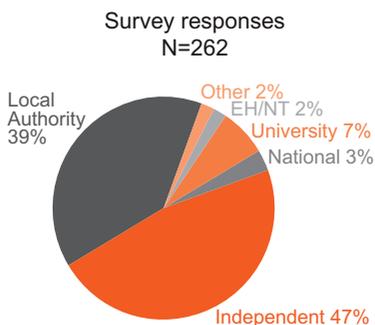
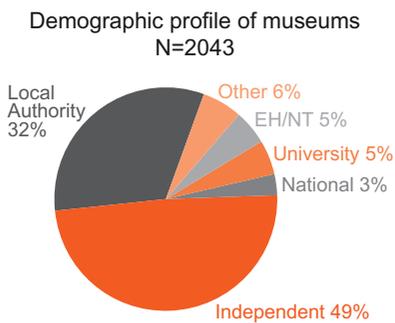
<sup>27</sup> Matty, S. 2005. *Museum statistics in England. Report to the Expert Meeting on statistics and performance indicators for European museums, 13-14 October 2005, Berlin, MLA.*

Fig. 2.1. The demographic profile of museum types in England and Wales. Sources: MLA's Digest of Statistics<sup>28</sup> and CyMal's Spotlight on Museums mapping project.<sup>29</sup>

\* A number of museum services that cover many museums responded to the survey.

\*\* National Trust museums were not included in the survey.

Demographic profile		Responses		Museums represented*	
Independent	1003	Independent	122	Independent	130
Local authority	651	Local authority	103	Local authority	211
Other	117	Other	6	Other	6
EH/NT	105	EH/NT**	4	National	16
University	97	University	18	EH/NT	4
National	70	National	9	University	18
		Unknown	1		
<b>Total</b>	<b>2043</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>



## 2.4 MUSEUM COLLECTION SURVEYS AND MAPPING

Various surveys are described above. Two web-based databases are also cited as a gauge for museum and collection distribution. Cornucopia was established in 1998 through the MGC<sup>30</sup> in response to Government's *Treasures in Trust* report,<sup>31</sup> which called for a way of recognising the richness and diversity of the UK's collections.<sup>32</sup> It was intended as a UK-wide database of museum collections,<sup>33</sup> incorporating DOMUS data. The 24 Hour Museum was established in 1999 as a partnership project between the Museums Documentation Association and the Campaign for Museums, and is now funded by the DCMS and MLA.

### Regional collections mapping projects

A large number of these have been undertaken (see Appendix 1). Most achieved a high response rate, typically over 90 per cent. Some only included registered museums. Among the most useful are the reports for the West Midlands, where biennial mapping projects have been carried out for over ten years: this is one of the few areas where some museum trends can be discerned. The South West's was also a successful complete mapping project. The surveys in Yorkshire & Humberside were carried out by collection area.

Even at this restricted scale the difficulties in defining collections quantitatively were clearly apparent. The industrial and social history report, in particular, showed in relief the detail necessary to comprehensively account for collections, even for a two year project covering only one region.

In some regions subject specific or museum type studies have been undertaken, providing detail that supplements overviews. Regional studies of university museums conducted between 1989 and 2001 led to a UK-wide review, which includes a gazetteer.<sup>34</sup> It is notable that a review of even this seemingly manageable portion of the museum world (university museums constitute only about 5 per cent of all museums in the country, around 97 museums) took over ten years to complete. The eclectic nature of these institutions and the diversity of their collections are very clear. This underscores the complexity of any museum mapping project.

For the North East region, only prehistory collections have yet been mapped. For London, MLA London's predecessor organisation, the LMA, did not conduct collection mapping in the same way as the regions mentioned above.<sup>35</sup> It was felt that results would not be useful because of the many specialist collections associated with organisations with a national remit (e.g. Royal College of Surgeons).

<sup>28</sup> Matty, S. 2005. *Museum statistics in England. Report to the Expert Meeting on statistics and performance indicators for European museums, 13-14 October 2005, Berlin.* MLA.

<sup>29</sup> CyMal, 2007. *Spotlight on museums.* Welsh Assembly Government.

<sup>30</sup> Carter, S., Hurst, B., Kerr, R., Taylor, E., & Winsor, P. 1999. *Museum focus. facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 2.* MGC. 23.; <http://www.cornucopia.org.uk/>

<sup>31</sup> DNH 1996. *Treasures in Trust: a review of museum policy.* Department of National Heritage.

<sup>32</sup> Turner, C. 2004. Cornucopia: An open collection description service, *Ariadne*, Vol. 40.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas, R. 1998. Taking Stock, *Museums Journal*, July 1998, 30-31.

<sup>34</sup> University Museums UK Group 2004. *University museums in the UK. A national resource for the 21st century.* University Museums UK Group. iii.

<sup>35</sup> MLA London Museum Development Officer, pers. comm.

### Collections mapped by subject

The impetus for some of these was the report from Re:source, *Preserving the past for the future*, in which the concept of a Distributed National Collection was advocated.<sup>36</sup> However, the idea of defining a comprehensive Distributed National Collection was deemed unrealistic. It was felt that such an exercise would be problematic for collections other than those consisting of relatively few bulky or highly valued objects.<sup>37</sup> Subject-specialist networks (SSNs), which arose from the *Renaissance in the regions* report,<sup>38</sup> are another route that may facilitate the sharing of knowledge about collections. Some of them have begun collection mapping.

Collections	Organisations	List or register
Transport collections	Heritage Railway Association Transport Trust Vintage Carriages Trust <sup>39</sup>	Railway Heritage Register
Aviation	British Aviation Preservation Council	National Aviation Heritage Register
Maritime	National Historic Ships Waterways Trust <sup>41</sup>	National Register of Historic Ships <sup>40</sup> Historic Boat Register
Agriculture/rural collections <sup>42</sup>	Rural Museums Network	Agricultural collections – tractors, combine harvesters <sup>43</sup>
Paintings	National Gallery, London University of Glasgow Birkbeck College	The National Inventory of Continental European Paintings (online 2008) <sup>44</sup>
	Public Catalogue Foundation	Easel paintings within public ownership <sup>45</sup>
Human remains	Human remains collections <sup>46</sup>	
Wartime loot	National Museum Directors' Conference	Wartime looting/spoliation reports <sup>47</sup>

Table 2.1. Some collections listing and mapping projects.

SSNs are providing collections information for some other large and widespread collections. Music collections across the UK are represented through an early review<sup>48</sup> and the Cecelia database, which comprises 1800 collection records (in libraries and archives as well as museums).<sup>49</sup>

A national initiative to account for the UK's natural history collections has been running for many years, containing some 15,365 entries for Scotland, Wales and England.<sup>50</sup> Egyptian antiquities, ethnographic collections, ceramics, Jewish history and culture and numismatics are also receiving attention.<sup>51</sup> Were these inventories to be brought together in a comprehensive way they would go some way towards assisting would-be users wishing to locate collections.

As Sally MacDonald has noted, the majority of these documentation exercises have mapped collections with natural limits: those that are either very big (where the cost of keeping is inescapable), very rare (where documentation is necessary for preservation), contested (where there is an ethical or legal imperative to locate things), or valuable (as in the case of paintings).<sup>52</sup> Where a pressing need has not been demonstrated, mapping exercises have yet to be comprehensively addressed.

### Classifying and quantifying collections

Three sources of data about collections distribution illustrate well the problems arising from different classification schemes.

The variation in these figures is due in large measure to their different collection categorisations and the sample sizes on which they are based. For instance, natural science may be in second place in the Cornucopia listings because geology and natural history are listed as separate collections (not infrequently done). The review of these data is also instructive on the usefulness of certain categories: for instance, museums largely ignore the category of 'past peoples' in favour of 'archaeology'.

<sup>36</sup> Re:source 2002. *Preserving the past for the future. Towards a national framework for collections management*. Re:source.

<sup>37</sup> Wilkinson, H. 2005. *Collections for the future*. Museums Association. pp. 5, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Re:source 2001. *Renaissance in the regions: a new vision for England's museums*. Re:source.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.vintagecarriagestrust.org/>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.nhsc.org.uk/>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.thewaterwaystrust.co.uk/>

<sup>42</sup> Shorland-Ball, R. 2000. *Farming, countryside and museums*. Museums & Galleries Commission. Viner, D. & Wilson, C. 2004. *Sorting the wheat from the chaff. The Distributed National Collection: a scoping and development study of agricultural heritage collections*. Museum of English Rural Life.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.ruralmuseumsnetwork.org.uk/>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/collection/inventory1.htm> <http://vads.ahds.ac.uk/collections/NIRP/index.php>

<sup>45</sup> <http://www.thepcf.org.uk/>

<sup>46</sup> DCMS 2005a. *Guidance for care of human remains in museums*. Department of Culture Media & Sport.

<sup>47</sup> [http://www.culturalpropertyadvice.gov.uk/spoliation\\_reports/](http://www.culturalpropertyadvice.gov.uk/spoliation_reports/) <http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/spoliation.html>

<sup>48</sup> Arnold-Foster, K. & La Rue, H. 1993. *Museums of music: A review of musical collections in the United Kingdom*. MGC/HMSO.

<sup>49</sup> <http://cecilia.orangeleaf.com/>

<sup>50</sup> <http://fenscore.man.ac.uk/>

<sup>51</sup> For a list of SSNs and their mission statements see [http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/find\\_a\\_network/](http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/find_a_network/)

<sup>52</sup> MacDonald, S. 2004. Paper presented at the Museums Association Conference, Edinburgh, 2004.

Table 2.2. Frequencies of collection types as reported in three different sources: the 24 Hour Museum website, the Cornucopia website and database and the DOMUS report.<sup>53</sup>

	24-hour museum N=3000+		Cornucopia N=1786		DOMUS N=1389	
RANK	Type	No. of Collections	Type	No. of Collections	Type	No. of Collections
1	Soc. Hist.	1599	Art & Design	1948	Soc. Hist.	935
2	Archives	1179	Nat. Science	726	Fine Art	708
3	Fine Art	1082	Ind.& Commerce	600	Photo.	687
LEAST	Sport	67	Past People	3	Medicine	157

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 3 Enjoyment and learning

A large music gallery that could be visited only by appointment had traditional cases but also two large sets of gamelan instruments covering the central part of the gallery (a gamelan is a type of Indonesian orchestra) laid out for practical use, so people could see how the whole orchestra worked. Museum staff and external gamelan groups regularly played on them in daytime and evening sessions. This was a rare case when I've seen a museum understand that exhibiting music should be as much about the sounds as the objects, and the practice of music as the observation of it. The education officer was herself a musician able to lead teaching sessions on the instruments, in addition to the music curators' own experience.

The manner in which collections are classified affects the profile of distribution. There are several possible levels, from a collection that constitutes a museum's entire holdings to identifiably separate collections to smaller distinguishable sub-sets of objects. Objects may be associated through materials, production place, period, function or indeed any other criteria. There is no standard terminology and several schemes for sub-division have been used. The 24 Hour Museum uses 31 collection categories, Cornucopia lists only 16, the DOMUS survey covered 21 types,<sup>54</sup> while the Scottish audit recognised 20.<sup>55</sup>

All of these schemes use ambiguous or redundant categories, such as the separation between 'weapons and accessories' and 'warfare and defence' in the 24 Hour Museum. One of the criticisms of the DOMUS classification scheme was that it mixed disciplines, collection type and specialist areas. The Scottish National Audit noted similar problems, but it was felt that those chosen mirrored the documentation descriptions used by museums and that in practice they were workable.<sup>56</sup> Little if any consideration has been given to what potential researchers or other users would find useful.

Categories should in any event not be seen as fixed but as subject to debate and evolution. The EEMLAC consultants' prescription, "A review of the collection categories is necessary to ensure consistency and avoid the loss of hidden collections in broader terms, e.g. horology in social history..."<sup>57</sup> may be impossible and even undesirable to follow.

The positioning of a newly acquired object within the context of other museum groupings is often a product of historically and geographically specific processes:<sup>58</sup> an object's classification is ultimately dependent upon its institutional context, including curatorial practices, interests and specialisation. Yorkshire and Humberside's analysis of social history and industrial collections, for example, encompassed agriculture, costume and textiles, decorative arts, numismatics, oral history, photographs, transport and military history.<sup>59</sup> A blurred distinction between decorative arts and social history, as well as with art generally, has also been noted.<sup>60</sup> Archives could arguably be included in social history, as might photographs, but as excavation records they also often occur under archaeology.

Thus, the issue is more than a matter of semantics, as classifications have a direct bearing upon curation and policy formation. For instance, Egyptology is often subsumed within 'archaeology'. Archaeology is a museum discipline which has very specific problems with regard to exponentially increasing collection numbers (see below), but Egyptian collections are not subject to this trend, since excavated material is no longer allowed to leave Egypt.

With the exception of transference from private collections, Egyptian collections in this country are unlikely to expand. Sweeping generalisations cannot be applied across the diversity of subject areas in museums, nor even within subjects themselves.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/>; <http://www.cornucopia.org.uk/>; Carter, S., et al, 1999. *Museum focus. Facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 2.* MGC. p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> Coles, A., Hurst, B., & Winsor, P. 1998. *Museum focus. Facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 1.* MGC. p. 16.

<sup>55</sup> SMC 2002. *A collective focus. Scotland's national audit, summary report.* Scottish Museums Council. 16.

<sup>56</sup> SMC 2002. *A collective focus. Scotland's national audit, summary report.* Scottish Museums Council. 16.

<sup>57</sup> EEMLAC 2005. *Collections and communities. A strategy for the East of England.* East of England Museums Libraries and Archives Council. p. 17.

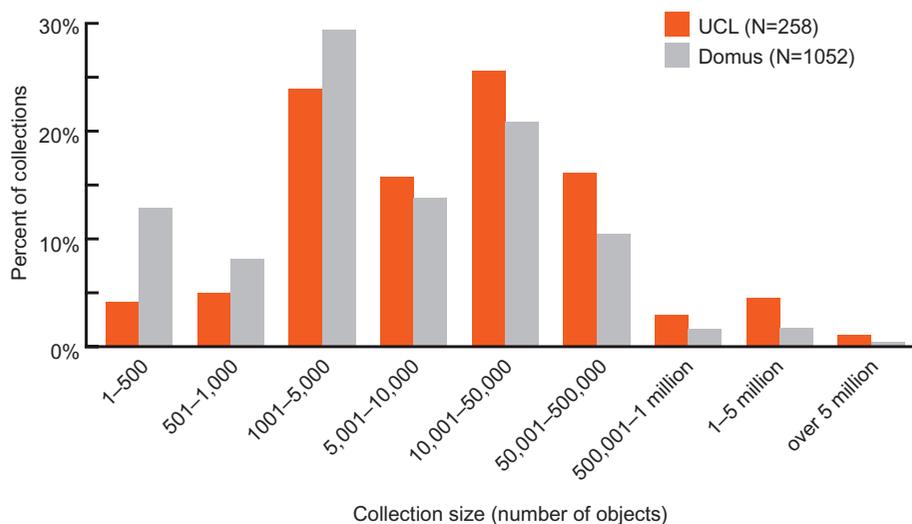
<sup>58</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. 1992. *Museums and the shaping of knowledge.* Routledge. pp. 5-7.

<sup>59</sup> Kenyon, J. 1992. *Collecting for the 21st century: a survey of industrial and social history collections in the museums of Yorkshire and Humberside.* Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council. p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> YHMC 1997. *Objects with visual ambition.* Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council. p. 73-5.



Figure 2.2. The frequency of collection sizes in the DOMUS 1999 survey compared with those in the museums represented in the current research. The categories 50,001–100,000 and 100,001–500,000 used in the DOMUS sample have been combined.



Classifications should thus be the means to an end. The best approach for the purposes of the current study is one that is sensitive to the nature of collections use, users and the effect these have on methods of storage and access. The DOMUS scheme best fits these requirements and is also the most comprehensive available survey of museum collections, and was adopted for this research.

## 2.5 THE SIZE OF THE COLLECTIONS RESOURCE

If quantifying the frequency of collection types is problematic, then estimating the size of collections presents even more difficulty.

The DOMUS report offered a very broad figure for the overall size of the UK collection:

'Adding the number of objects stated by each museum results in a total of over 189 million objects. This figure could be considered conservative, as it is based on the 1,052 responses to this question, 61 per cent of those to whom the questionnaire was sent.

Clearly the actual number of objects held in Registered museums alone [the survey included national museums] is likely to exceed even a rounded up total of 200 million objects'. The figure of 200 million objects would include the alternative figures of 120, 134 or 136 million objects in the collections of the national

museums, reported in a survey commissioned by the DCMS in 2003.<sup>61</sup> In the current research the sample is not large enough, and the range of collection sizes too great, for any confirmation of this figure to be offered, but it is indeed likely to be a minimum, as the DOMUS report suggests.

The DOMUS report was criticised for lack of statistical accuracy,<sup>62</sup> but it seems that error is inherent in such an exercise. Overall, previous surveys do provide broad profiles and figures that can form a backdrop for discussion.

Collections sizes in the current sample correspond broadly with those found in the DOMUS surveys. From the sources described it is possible to measure, at least approximately, the frequency of museum collection types and to attempt an estimate of their relative sizes, but what may be more interesting are the differences between the extremes rather than detailed gradations.

Some collection types may be more subject to fluctuation than others. Archaeological material is case in point. With rescue archaeology an inherent part of statutory planning in the UK (since the publication of Planning Policy Guideline (PPG) 16 in 1990, soon to be updated),<sup>63</sup> artefacts rapidly accumulate, with concomitant concerns about a crisis in storage management.<sup>64</sup> In any case, the continuing processes of collection management constantly alter the demographics of collections distribution. For instance, MLA West Midlands has noted that significant fluctuations in numbers reflect improvements and variations in counting techniques rather than in actual collection sizes.<sup>65</sup> Even so, we might assume that the large numbers involved make very drastic changes unlikely.

The issue of what constitutes an object (each teacup and saucer or the tea set as a whole) is a perennial problem,<sup>66</sup> as is that of how to deal with the thousands of small items that are often numbered in bulk rather than individually, common practice in natural science and archaeology.

<sup>61</sup> Keene, S. 2007. Collections in the English national museums: the numbers. In: S.Keene, ed. *Studies of stored collections in museums. Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, Special Volume 1, 115-34.

<sup>62</sup> Wright, M., Selwood, S., Creaser, C., & Davies, J. E. 2001. *UK museums retrospective statistics project*. Loughborough University.

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planning/planningpolicyguidance/historicenvironment/229220/>

<sup>64</sup> Merriman, N. & Swain, H. 1999. Archaeological archives: serving the public interest? *European Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 249-267. 254 Society of Museum Archaeologists 1995. *Long term storage and curation of archaeological archives*. SMA.

<sup>65</sup> MLA West Midlands 2004. *Fast forward update*. MLA West Midlands. p. 25.

<sup>66</sup> Carter, S., Hurst, B., Kerr, R., Taylor, E., & Winsor, P. 1999. *Museum focus. Facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 2*. MGC. p. 24.

## Regional distributions

Across all regions the distribution of collections most frequently found is similar to that in the DOMUS report, with the addition of archive collections. Costume and textile, photographic and social history collections clearly predominate, reflecting the role of museums as foci for the construction of local identities and for maintaining personal connections with museum collections.

The sample in the present survey is in line with the overall demographics. The extent of social history may be over-represented given that it is strongly linked with other subject areas:<sup>67</sup> some respondents may have included oral history, archive, decorative arts and photographic collections within 'social history'. Those collections may consequently be even more prevalent than they appear to be.

Biology/natural history collections are concentrated in a few centres. It is clear that there are far fewer of these collections than other types, yet they constitute one of the largest in terms of numbers of objects (Appendix 2). For example, in the South East the biology collections are the largest of all collection categories, but over half of the objects are held by one institution, the Booth Museum of Natural History in Brighton.<sup>68</sup>

The low occurrence of oral history may be because this material has only recently been identified as a collection type. Maritime collections naturally relate to important ports and harbours and hence are regionally variable. Ethnographic collections are also infrequent in these surveys, perhaps because such collections seldom have local relevance and require specialist curation.

<sup>67</sup> Carter, S., Hurst, B., Kerr, R., Taylor, E., & Winsor, P. 1999. *Museum focus. Facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 2, MGC.* p. 28.

<sup>68</sup> MLA South East 2001. *A measure of success.* MLA South East. p. 25.

## Use Study 3 – Public engagement with collections processes

The enormous historic house has fairly recently been acquired for public use. It is an exemplar of painstaking care in developing policies and attitudes to its collections that take full account of local people's views – a process of mutual education.

The vision for the house and collections underpins all policies and practice:

- Conserved for everybody
- Visited by many
- Inspiration to some
- A pivotal experience for a significant few

With the house were acquired about 40,000 objects, inseparable from the house as they are all things that were used in or for the house by its occupants. The policy is not to dispose of seemingly surplus, i.e. less important, material and objects, but to preserve virtually everything so that the contents continue to represent the four generations that lived in the house, together with their servants etc. As an example, a large number of instant coffee jars that had been cleaned and kept by the house owners were being individually databased and numbered by the team of collections volunteers.

### Policies and strategies

Very detailed plans and policies have been developed and recorded for the way that the house, contents, gardens and grounds are maintained and preserved. Several consultation meetings were held with, in all, more than 150 local people and 'stakeholders' (defined as those who had the power to seriously disrupt the 'system'). These included professionals, neighbours and local councillors, young people who'd had anything to do with the house, ex staff.

The participants were clear that they attached great importance to the layering of evidence arising from four generations of ownership.

From the consultation, a Significance Statement was developed and fed back to the discussion groups to check.

A several day workshop for the management staff was held at which many important principles and policies were worked out, such as the vision and the significance scheme. Every element of the house has been assigned a rating of significance:

A – high B – significant C – some significance N – neutral D – detracts.

### Collections users and uses

The national body has a positive policy of engaging with volunteers etc. (about 5 million nationally). Collections management and conservation are used as an opportunity for learning and teaching. A key policy for the house and estate is to engage and utilise local non-staff and businesses whenever possible in work on it. The staff also work with agencies dealing with the unemployed, disadvantaged, youth, etc. and there are several pieces of work that are being or have been undertaken with them. The importance of working with professionals who are experienced and qualified to deal with these groups is emphasized.



This section takes a primarily statistical view of the evidence on the access and use of collections. It will examine differences and similarities between museums with fewer users and those with larger numbers. Throughout, the term 'users' will mean 'users or visitors'.

### 3.1 FINDINGS

#### How much use?

The amount of access to or use of museum collections is low overall: only 20 per cent of the museums in the sample reported 400 or more users or visitors a year to their stored collections, and well over half had fewer than 100 (two a week). The 36 top 20 per cent 'more users' museums are compared to the 80 per cent 'fewer users' museums for the purposes of this study.

#### Public demand

Museums reported growing public demand for access to collections; the museums in the group with more collections users strikingly so.

#### What is associated with greater or less use?

##### Associated with more users

Factors that were associated with reporting more users are mainly ones that are under the control of the museum and influenced by management priorities and motivation. It is hardly surprising that more collections use was associated with:

- Publicising and marketing collections access
- Provision of access for groups as well as individuals
- Having a designated or national collection

##### Not associated with more users

- Type of museum: national and university museums were likely to have 'more users', but not significantly so.

In contradiction to the perceptions of respondents, resource based factors in general were not particularly associated with more users. These include:

- Number of staff / size of museum
- Receipt of a grant
- Whether the museum is accredited or registered
- How people find out what is in the collection
- Type of collection.

In museum staff opinions, lack of staff was the top choice for obstacles to collections use.

However, staff numbers were not associated with more use. It seems that this can be surmounted if there is the will to do so. Many text comments mentioned online collections information as a driver for greater demand and use, but an association was not demonstrated statistically in this sample.

#### Are the collections sufficiently well used?

*Q.33 Perhaps, in your opinion, the museum's collections are sufficiently well used (for example, because of preservation/conservation issues). In your view, is this the case?*

In the opinion of 73 per cent of respondents the collections were not sufficiently used. There was no difference between responses from the 'more' and 'fewer users' museums.

### 3.2 DISCUSSION: factors that could make a difference

Factors seemingly relevant to the amount of collections use are illustrated in Fig. 3.1. Statistical tests on the survey results suggest that it is management and user factors that are significantly associated with fewer or more non-staff users. There were weaker associations with collection and place factors. Museum and resource factors had no significant relationship with use. The survey also asked respondents for their opinions; these professional perspectives were mostly not associated with fewer or more users, except for a divergence of view on which factors make a difference to collections use.

## THE EVIDENCE

### 3.3 WHAT CONSTITUTES FEWER OR MORE USERS?

#### General data sources

*Q.17 How many visitors or users who are not the staff of the museum are there to your stored collections each year?*

Few museums record collection visitor or user numbers in any detail or consistently.<sup>69</sup> Anticipating this, the questionnaire encouraged respondents to make some reply even if approximate. Of the total of 263 respondents, 181 provided a figure. Many respondents will have supplied the nearest round number.

## The Ideas Collection

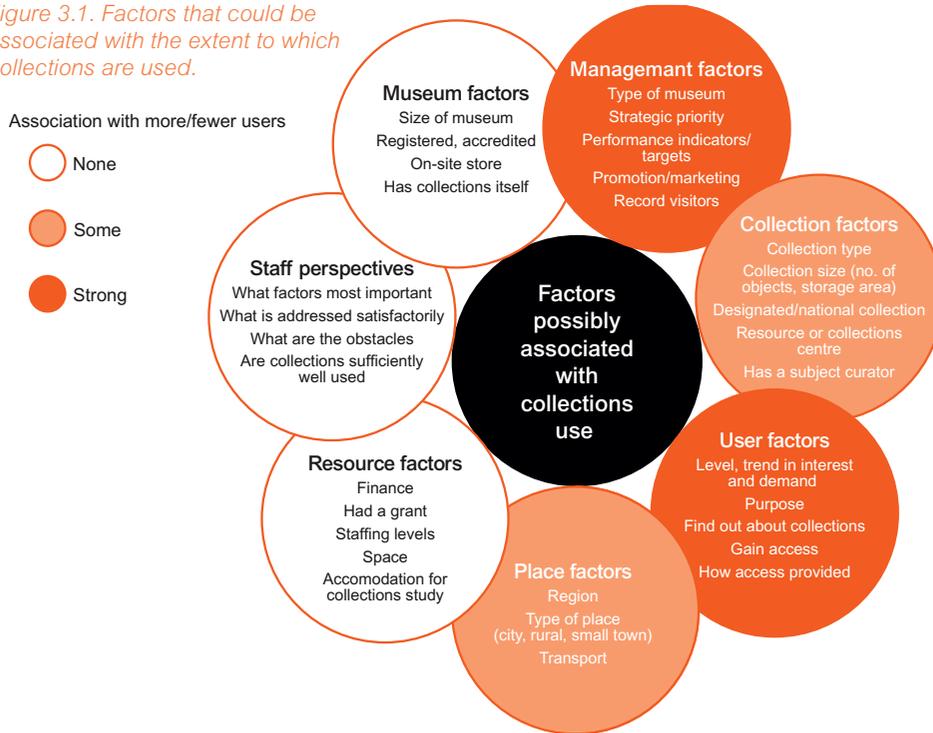
### Idea Collection 4

#### Enjoyment

Sleepovers in stores

<sup>69</sup> Stuart Davies Associates 2008. *Recording physical access to stored collections*. London Museums Hub.

Figure 3.1. Factors that could be associated with the extent to which collections are used.



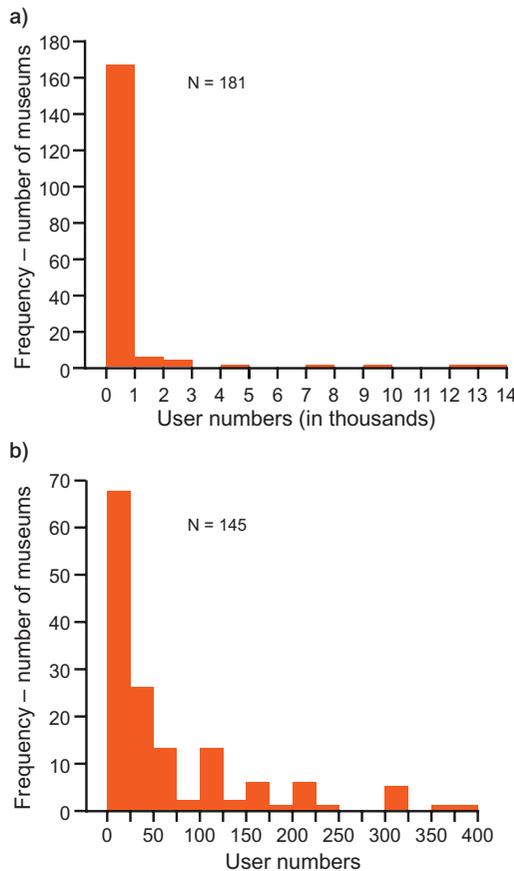
Reasons for non-reply would include: multi department museums leave it to individual departments to record collections use; other museums simply do not record use at all.<sup>70</sup>

The histograms, Fig. 3.2, and Table 3.1 show the very wide range of visitor numbers a year, from none in three cases to 14,000 in one. Over half (99; 55 per cent) reported 50 or fewer collections users a year; 60 per cent have 100 or fewer.

Users a year	Number of museums	Per cent	Cumulative per cent
0 users	3	2%	2%
1-9	31	19%	21%
11-100	107	30%	60%
101-400	36	18%	80%
401-1000	21	10%	92%
1001 +	15	6%	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>100%</b>	

Table 3.1. Numbers of museums and collections visitors or users a year.

Figure 3.2. Histograms showing the distribution of museums according to the numbers of collections users a) for all museums that reported a number and b) details for those with fewer than 400 users a year.



For the purpose of analysing differences between museums with more collections users and those with fewer, museums were divided into two groups. The top 20 per cent 'more users' group comprises 36 museums that reported 400 or more users a year – just under ten a week. The other 145 'fewer users' museums make up the 80 per cent receiving fewer than 400 users a year. Considered statistically, do results from the two groups differ in any way?

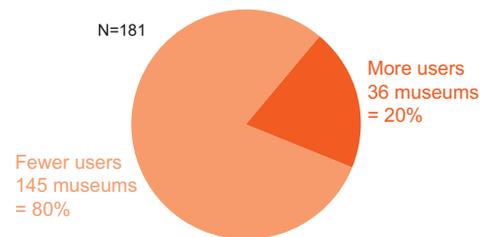


Figure 3.3. Proportions of museums in the sample in the 'more users', 400+ collections users a year, and 'fewer users' groups.

<sup>70</sup> Stuart Davies Associates 2008. Recording physical access to stored collections. London Museums Hub, and text replies to Q.17.

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 5 Enjoyment and social benefit

Taking museum handling collections (e.g. loan boxes) to hospitals, care homes and Primary Care Trusts. Museum staff, volunteers (museums/hospital/other care workers) or students can deliver sessions (as part of training). The projects have widened access to the collections for a new audience and collected vital data on the potentially therapeutic value of taking museum collections to patient's bedsides, providing a novel enrichment activity. There is considerable potential for museums to collaborate with hospitals or other care homes and integrate handling collections into arts programmes and volunteering programmes.

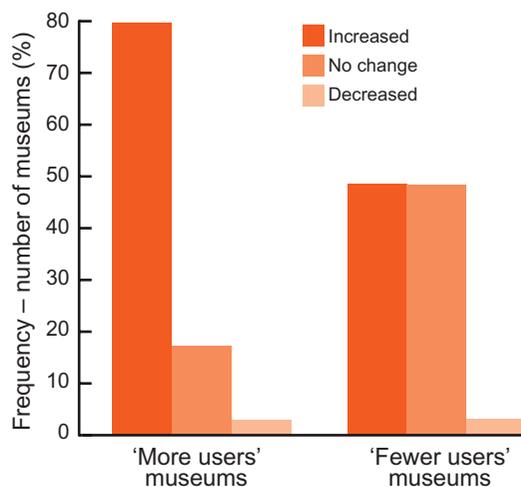
### 3.4 PUBLIC DEMAND

Q.28 Has demand for access to the collections changed in recent years?

This is one of the clearest results in the survey. In the sample as a whole, of the 222 museums that replied to this question only seven reported a decreased demand for access.

Lack of demand was also ranked very low in 'obstacles to increased use'. In both 'more' and 'fewer' groups, museums were experiencing increased demand, especially those in the 'more users' group (81 per cent compared to 49 per cent in the lower use group).

Is increased demand associated with stronger promotion of access to collections? Statistically, this apparent association could be due to chance. Demand may in general be arising from factors in the audience, rather than being dependent on promotion, since museums rating their promotion level as none or little reported increased demand – 45 per cent increased, and 51 per cent no change – in similar proportions to those rating their promotion efforts strongly.



Text comments reinforce the impression from the numerical statistics that demand for collections access is generally growing. Most replies mentioned one or more of six factors as explanation for increased demand. In order of frequency of mention, these are:

- Museum policy and attitude, associated with positive promotion of this service; (41 mentions – of which 15 were from the 37 higher use museums)
- Family, local history, genealogy (24 mentions, only 4 from the higher use group)
- Collections online, website, internet, information about collections (18 mentions, 5 from the higher use group)
- Research, special interest groups, subject based interest (24 mentions, only 4 from the higher use group)
- Improved facilities, new staff etc (11 mentions)
- Education use (10 mentions)

#### Decreased demand

The seven comments explaining a decrease in demand included *“However this is due to the collections not being well documented or particularly easily accessed”* *“Until 2000, the ...Museum housed the Crafts Study Centre, which included provision for access to the craft collections in purpose-built study rooms.”* *“Decreased in some ways as we have cut the days on which the study centre is open, so we get fewer unplanned visits and drop-ins.”* and, the ideal perhaps, *“If this question refers to stored collections, the answer is decreased - because almost every item is now on display.”*

Figure 3.4. & Table 3.2. Changes in demand for access to the collections in recent years, by more or fewer users.

	'More users' museums		'Fewer users' museums		All museums in sample	
Increased	28	80%	67	49%	115	52%
No change	6	17%	67	49%	100	45%
Decreased	1	3%	4	3%	7	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>100%</b>

### 3.5 MORE USERS: ASSOCIATED FACTORS

#### Promoting access

Q.25 Is public access to stored collections positively promoted ...? Score from 1, not at all, to 5, strongly.

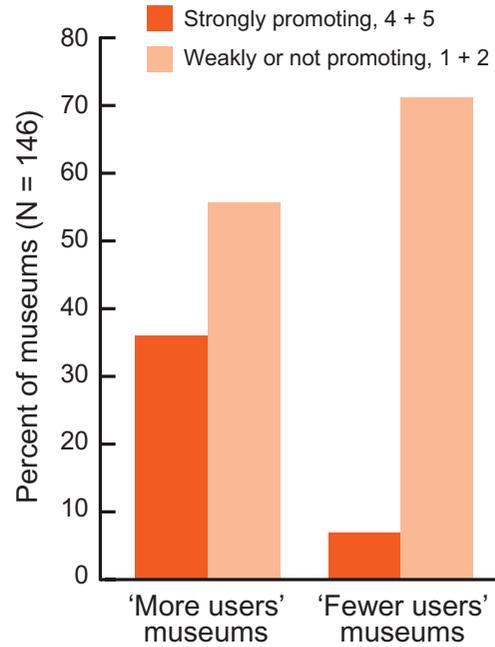


Figure 3.5 & Table 3.3. The relationship of how strongly museums promote collections access to the number of collections users. Indeterminate responses are omitted.

Promoting access to collections is highly likely to be associated with 'more users'.<sup>71</sup> A much higher proportion of the museums in the top 20 per cent for users scored this 'strongly': 35 per cent of them, compared to 7 per cent of those with fewer than 400 users a year (museums giving the non-committal score of 3 discounted).

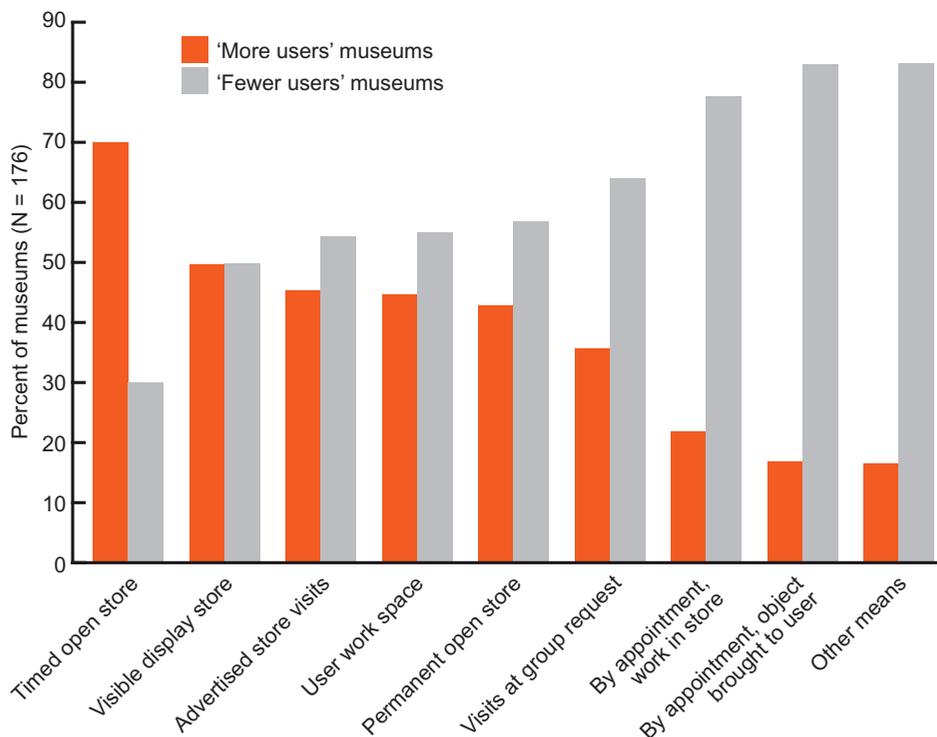
Looking at detailed replies, six of the museums with 'more users' used the press to promote access, compared to only two of the 135 with fewer users. The website was the most common medium. Many museums used talks, society newsletters and outreach activities as well. These routes are connected to relationships with groups and individuals, which as we shall see are thought to be an important factor in collections use.

The DOMUS survey in 1999 found that while 98 per cent of respondents offered access to stored material, less than 22 per cent promoted that access in their museum literature.<sup>72</sup> It seems that little has changed.

	'More users' museums	'Fewer users' museums	Total	All museums
Strongly promoting, 4 + 5	13	10	23	165
Column %	36%	7%	13%	84%
Weakly or not promoting, 1 + 2	20	103	123	31
Column %	56%	71%	68%	16%
Indeterminate/no info	3	32	35	67
Column %	8%	22%	19%	19%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>263</b>
	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

<sup>71</sup> The chi-squared test, confirmed by the Fisher's Exact Test of statistical significance.

<sup>72</sup> Carter, S., Hurst, B., Kerr, R., Taylor, E., & Winsor, P. 1999. *Museum focus. Facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 2.* MGC. pp. 33-34



### Means of access to the stored collections

#### Q.16 Can the public access the stored collections? If so, how?

It is not surprising that ways of providing access for people in groups – and advertised or regularly open rather than at their request – was associated with larger numbers of people visiting or using collections. 'Fewer users' museums were more likely to provide individual access (although they are also likely to offer a 'permanent open store').

Figure 3.6 & Table 3.4. Means of accessing collections related to greater or less use. Respondents could select up to three means of access. Numbers and percentages are of selections; totals, of responses.

	'More users' museums		'Fewer users' museums		Total responses	
Visits at group request	29	36%	52	64%	81	100%
By appointment, object brought to user	24	17%	118	83%	142	100%
By appointment, work in store	21	22%	74	78%	95	100%
User workspace	17	45%	21	55%	38	100%
Advertised store visits	15	46%	18	55%	33	100%
Visible display store	11	50%	11	50%	22	100%
Timed open store	7	70%	3	30%	10	100%
Permanent open store	3	43%	4	57%	7	100%
Other means	2	17%	10	83%	12	100%
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>36</b>		<b>140</b>		<b>176</b>	

### Having a designated or national collection

27 per cent of museums in the 'more users' group had designated or national collections, compared to only eight per cent of those with 'fewer users', many of them national or university collections that are well represented in the 'more users' museums.

	Number with designated or national collections in whole sample	Of those, that provided user numbers	Of those, number in 'more users' group	Per cent that provided a user number in 'more users' group
Local authority	13	8	4	50%
National	9	5	3	60%
Independent	6	4	3	75%
University	5	5	2	40%
Armed services	1	1	0	0%
NT / EH	0	0		
Other	0	0		
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>57%</b>

Table 3.5. Museums with designated or national collections showing those that were in the 'more users' group for numbers of non-staff collections users.

### Type of museum (governance and funding)

The 'more users' group included more national and university museums, and fewer local authority and especially independent ones than would be expected from proportions overall. The 'Other' category includes several types of museum: here, it is notable that the three English Heritage regional stores all reported relatively high numbers of visitors to collections, while armed service museums, surprisingly given the reported family interest in their collections, did not. Statistically, however, this could have been due to random variation.

Table 3.6. Numbers of museums of different types in the sample and that provided a figure for the number of non-staff collections users a year.

Museum type	Number in whole sample	Per cent of whole sample	That provided a figure for users	Per cent of all those that provided a figure	Number in 'more users' group
Independent	116	44%	73	40%	10
Local authority	102	39%	74	41%	13
University	18	7%	15	8%	6
National	9	3%	6	3%	3
Armed services	9	3%	5	3%	0
Other	5	2%	5	3%	1
English Heritage	3	2%	3	2%	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>36</b>

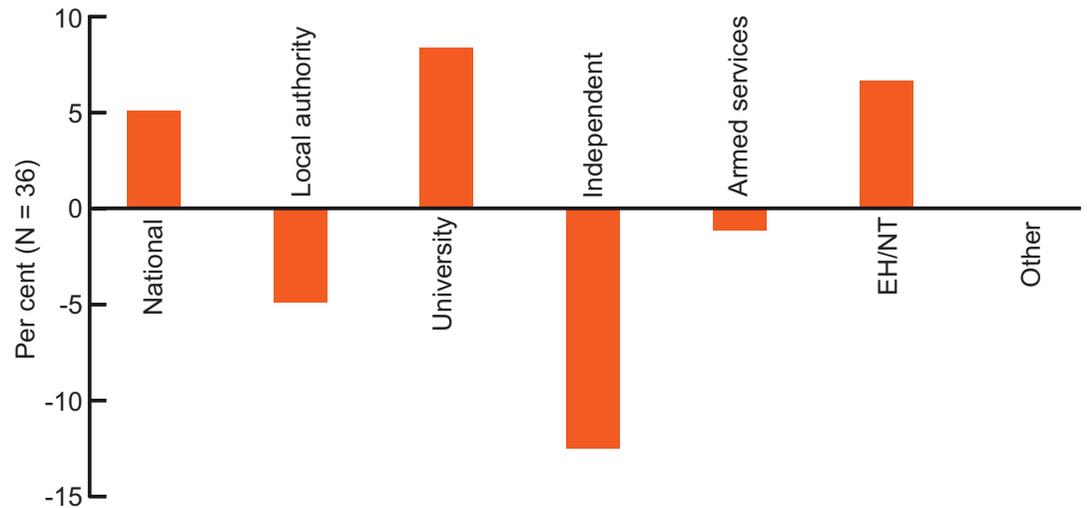


Figure 3.7 & Table 3.7. The proportions of museums in the top and lower visitor number groups. The bottom row compares the proportion in the top 20 per cent of museums with that expected if the proportions were the same as in the types of museum overall.

	National	Local authority	University	Independent	Other	Total
Museums with 'more users'	3	13	6	10	4	36
Row %	8%	36%	17%	28%	11%	100%
Museums with 'fewer users'	3	61	9	63	9	145
Row %	2%	42%	6%	43%	6%	100%
<b>Total – whole sample</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>Row %</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Total % minus % with 'more users'</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>-5%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>-13%</b>	<b>4%</b>	

### 3.6 FACTORS THAT SHOWED NO DIFFERENCE

#### Number of staff

Surprisingly, the number of museum staff was not statistically associated with more or fewer users. The complete range of staff numbers was represented in the 'more users' group. Several small museums with less than five staff had 1000 or more users a year. One museum had no staff, was entirely volunteer run, and achieved 500 collections users a year; another small museum had 14,000. At the other extreme, two national museums with 140 and 900 staff had over 9,000 and over 12,500 collections users annually.

#### Grants for collections related purposes<sup>73</sup>

**Q.15 Storage grants:** Since about 1995, have you receive a grant(s) that have included improvements for collections storage?

Are museums that have had grants for collections related purposes such as storage or documentation more likely to have more users? It may be thought that such measures would lead to increased access, but this supposition was not supported by the statistics.

Table 3.8. Association of 'more' or 'fewer' users with having had a collection related grant.

	Had a grant	No grant information
<b>Total museums with grants</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>128</b>
Museums with more users As % of those with grants	21 22%	15
Museums with fewer users As % of those with grants	76 78%	69
<b>Total museums</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>84</b>
	<b>100%</b>	
User numbers not known	38	44

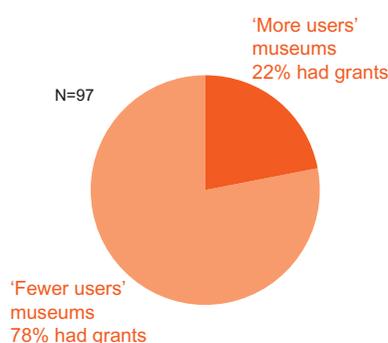


Figure 3.8. The proportions of museums with or without grants are almost identical with those with more or fewer collections users a year.

Of the 97 museums that gave us visitor numbers and also had grants,

21 (22%) are in the 20 per cent of museums with more collections users

76 (78%) are in the 80 per cent of museums with fewer collections users.

So there is no significant difference in visitor figures between museums that have had grants and the sample museum population as a whole.

This seems surprising, so to make sure, from the other perspective, are museums in the 'more

visitor' group more likely to have had a grant? There is almost exactly the same proportion for 'more users' museums, 'fewer users' ones and those that did not supply a figure for users:

Of 37 museums in the top 20 per cent for users 21 (58%) had grants

Of 145 museums in the lower 80 per cent for users 76 (52%) had grants

Of 81 museums where number of users was not given 38 (47%) had grants

263 museums in sample:  
135 museums with grants

However we look at the statistics, in this sample, museums that have had a grant are no more likely to be in the top bracket for numbers of collections users than those that have not.

#### Accredited or registered status

Accreditation or registration did not appear to be a factor in more or fewer collections visitors or users. Of the 217 accredited or registered museums in the sample, 82 per cent are within the 'fewer users' group, and 18 per cent among the 'more users' museums – almost the same proportions as in the sample generally.

#### How do people find out what is in the collections?

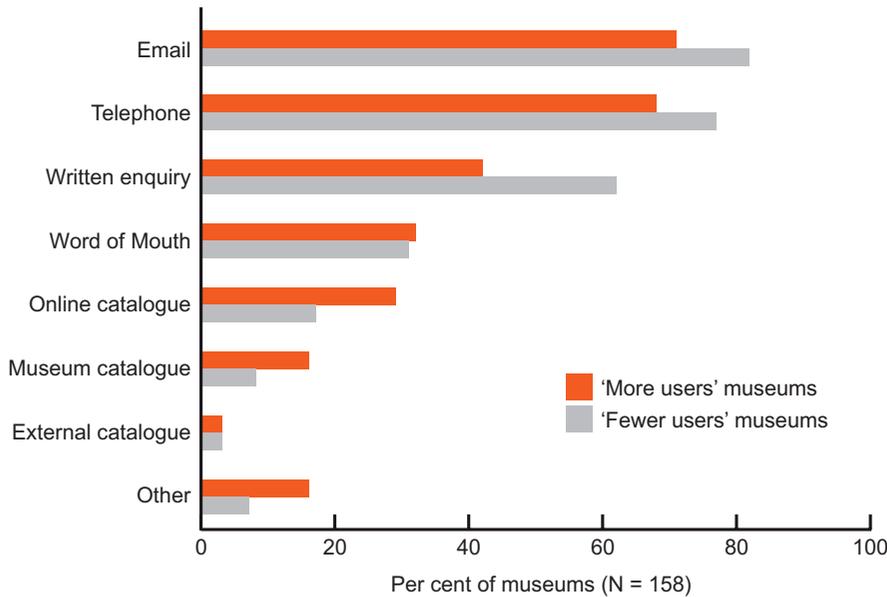
**Q.21 How do people find out what objects are in the collection? Please indicate the three most used routes.** (See also Section 7.3).

Contrary to expectation that listing collections online would be associated with more use, there was no statistical association between the means of discovery and numbers of users. The data showed little difference between the 20 per cent of 'more users' museums and the 80 per cent 'fewer users' museums. A slightly higher proportion of 'more users' museums cited 'online catalogue' as the main route,<sup>74</sup> a lower proportion, 'written enquiry'. This might be due to the greater representation of national and university museums, as there has been government pressure on national museums to properly inventory their holdings, and research council funding for university museums. Such museums might be more likely to have collections databases online (Q.22).

<sup>73</sup> Survey response data were supplemented from records of grants given from all major sources, including the DCMS, the Designed Collections Fund, the Wolfson Museums & Galleries Improvement fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

<sup>74</sup> Would respondents know if visitors had used an online catalogue? Given the degree of personal attention they receive in accessing collections, these responses may well be valid.

However, in text replies to other questions such as whether demand for collections access had increased, many museums (in both more and fewer users categories) either attributed an increase in demand to their recent online catalogue or else noted that they had plans to put collections information online, which they expected to increase demand or the amount of access.



### 3.7 REVIEW: Associations of user numbers with different factors

Statistical analysis indicates that some factors are significantly associated with higher or lower numbers of visitors or users, while others, sometimes surprisingly, are not (Fig. 3.1). The statistics cannot prove a causal link between these statistics, but examining qualitative evidence from text replies (Section 4) may help.

#### Museum factors

There was no association of use with being accredited or registered, nor with the size of the museum (measured by staff numbers). Having an on-site store may be important – storage location is further discussed below, in Sections 6 and 8.

#### Management factors

Type of museum, promotion of collections access, and how access was organised did appear to be associated with fewer or more users. National and university museums tend to achieve above average numbers. University museums have in recent years made a considerable effort to justify support from their universities, and their collections were mostly established primarily for use in teaching and research. As public property, local authority collections might be expected to be better used, especially with the growing demand from family and place-focused researchers. However, some text comments explained that local authorities can perceive this low volume use as not cost effective or even elitist. Independent museums also reported fewer users: shortage of resources was a top choice for them in obstacles to accessing collections. However, a number of independent museums, some very small, are included in the 'more users' group.

Providing access to stores for people in groups, especially as routine either while the museum is open or on special advertised open days, is an obvious way to achieve greater access. 'Fewer users' museums are more likely to be associated with individual access.

Many of the museums, especially in the higher use group, rate connections with users and user groups as important.

Ways to find out what is in the collections	'More users' museums		'Fewer users' museums		Totals	
	Number of selections	% of museums selecting	Number of selections	% of museums selecting		
Email	22	71%	104	82%	126	80%
Telephone	21	68%	98	77%	119	75%
Written enquiry	13	42%	79	62%	92	58%
Word of mouth	10	32%	39	31%	49	31%
Online catalogue	9	29%	21	17%	30	19%
Museum catalogue	5	16%	10	8%	15	9%
External catalogue	1	3%	4	3%	5	3%
Other	5	16%	9	7%	14	9%
<b>Total museums</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure 3.9 & Table 3.9. How do people find out what is in the collections? Respondents could pick the three most common routes. Due to multiple selections percentages total more than 100.

### Collection factors

The type of collection, although thought by respondents to be significant, in fact seems not to be associated with amount of use: a very wide variety of collections was represented in the 'more users' museums. National or designated collections were associated with more use.

The survey also asked whether the respondents felt that the collections were sufficiently well used, prompting that there might be good reasons, for example conservation, why they in fact were (Q33). Overall, 74 per cent of respondents thought they were not, and this was the same for both the lower or higher use brackets.

### User based factors

Demand from users has grown, as experienced in over half the museums in the sample (52 per cent), but in the top group significantly more so than the lower visitor number group. Overall only seven museums of the 222 in this sample reported decreased demand.

### Place based factors

Some respondents identified a rural location as an obstacle to use. The type of place – small town, city etc – was not thought important. Statistically no association was demonstrated.

### Resource factors

Resource factors were ranked almost the same by 'more' and 'fewer users' museums alike, so it may be that motivation, resulting in promotion

to the public and practical measures, can surmount resource problems. Resources ultimately depend on strategic priority and policies on collections use.

## 3.8 PERSPECTIVES FROM MUSEUM STAFF

Turning to the opinions of the museum professionals, respondents were invited to identify, in separated questions, what factors they felt were satisfactorily addressed in their museum, what factors were most important to collections use, and what were the greatest obstacles to use.

In the ranking of selections, the only difference was in 'what makes a difference?' High use museums ranked user connections, staff enthusiasm and the type of collection; lower use museums, type of collection, how people find out what is in the collection, and store location. The museums in the high use group had a complete range of collection types, so it seems that the type of collection is not as important as respondents thought it to be.

In 'Obstacles', a significantly higher proportion of 'more users' museums selected staff, while more 'fewer users' museums selected space. It may be that lack of suitable spaces for access is an overriding problem, and if that is overcome then the strain on resources falls on staffing.

*Table 3.10. The opinions of staff on matters relating to collections use. In each question, respondents were asked to select three top choices.*

What makes most difference to the use of collections?			Which factors are satisfactory in your museum?			What are the main obstacles to greater use?		
	Selections	% of museums		Selections	% of museums		Selections	% of museums
Type of collection	108	50%	User connections	122	44%	Limited staff	151	65%
User connections	94	43%	Subject curator	89	32%	Space	143	62%
How to find out about	84	39%	Store location	84	30%	Limited resources	121	52%
Enthusiasm	79	36%	Users can find out	74	26%	Money	83	36%
Store location	63	29%	PLs reported	31	11%	Low priority	48	21%
Sen man support	56	26%	High priority	18	6%	Security	45	19%
Subject curator	51	23%	Other	10	4%	Documentation	42	18%
Type of place	37	17%				Lack public interest	20	9%
Type of mus	24	11%				Other	20	9%
Region	4	2%						
<b>N museums responding</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>N museums responding</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>N museums responding</b>	<b>232</b>	



43

44

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 6 Learning

In a collections store designed to facilitate access by groups - one example of its varied use is to take school visits into the store for a planned theme. For example, the seaside: children look at a nineteenth century seaside picture (many have never been to the seaside) and they are encouraged to imagine smells, sounds etc. Then they go to see other seaside related objects in other areas of the store.

This section will profile the 36 museums with 400 or more collections users or visitors a year: the top 20 per cent. Here, more detailed, qualitative information from text replies helps to explain the reasons behind the numbers discussed in the previous section.

### 4.1 DISCUSSION

The 'more users' museums did not know that they were in the top 20 per cent for collections users, and from their remarks they do not think they are exceptional in any way. Indeed, by most practical criteria, they are not. They represent almost the complete range of museum and collection types: there is no magic formula for success. What comes across is a sense of pride in achievement, and a positive attitude to opening up and making their collections available. The local authority museums in particular appear to reflect a new commitment, sometimes prompted by the Best Value process, to make this resource publicly accessible. These attitudes lead these museums to promote collections use and access and to find ways to provide for it that do not overwhelm them.

There was no major difference between 'fewer users' and 'more users' museums. However, among local authority museums especially, for every mention of positive attitudes to collections there is another comment pointing out that such low volume use can be seen as elitist and not cost effective. There is clearly an important advocacy task here.

A respondent in a local authority museum service points to reasons why museums hesitate to offer a fully developed service, and then describes the negative consequences of not marketing, leading to councillors not believing in collections use as a worthwhile service:

*"Museums do not market reserve collections as a form of demand management to prevent being swamped by demands that they could not process without very considerable investment of staff time and other resources. This means that they now have to promote the priority of this use to senior council management, councillors etc. which will be impossible without central government leads and grants. Museum management needs to understand how to break down*

*the market for use into a series of niche markets, understanding the needs of each, without abandoning the core market use by researchers in favour of new potential users. The profession must re-prioritise the specialist, enthusiast and academic use of collections not as an alternative or competing use but as part of the way in which knowledge regarding the collections is developed and can then be passed on to broader based use. Development of use is highly dependant on specialist input for a relatively small market sector for example the development of reminiscence boxes. In comparison say to a 'fun day' of quizzes and face painting. This means confronting entrenched ideas in local government officers and counsellors antagonistic to anything that can be depicted as elitist and not market driven. It also means confronting conservation attitudes based on minimising handling and exposure or storage and packing reducing visibility."*

## THE EVIDENCE

### 4.2 WHAT SORT OF MUSEUMS?

Within these 36 'more user' museums, there are seven distinct groups:

- Large national museums
- Large object collections (five: railways, transport, farm and agriculture, mining)
- Highly specialised collections (six: costume and textiles, vintage radio and television, botany, architecture, a service museum. Three publicly funded, three independent).
- English Heritage archaeology regional stores (three)
- University museums (six: archaeology, environment, mixed, art, ethnography)
- Large local museums (seven: all local authority funded, including a museum service with centralised collections)
- Small local museums (seven: three independent and four local authority funded).

## Use Study 4 – Engaging with different interests – a military museum

### The museum and its collections moved to new premises in 2001.

There is a well-established group of twelve volunteers, mostly retired people. Their main task is helping to invigilate the displays, but one of them recently joined a project to list the contents of boxes of WWII diaries.

The museum enjoys a great deal of interest in its collections, especially the archival collections, mostly from those researching the history of family members in military service. Family members often visit in groups, and the museum ‘makes a fuss of them’, showing them the relevant records and so on.

The museum has developed a partnership with a local university, which has made some finance available from its own resources to design and build a database to make information about the archive collections available. An application to the Heritage Lottery Fund is being developed jointly with the university, to scan war diaries. These will complement other archives which are accessible on The National Archives website.

Tours of the stores are provided from time to time. Interest from participants is welcomed – for example one of their volunteers was a member of a fencing club and generated requests for six more tours from his fellow enthusiasts.

### The future

The museum runs induction sessions for newly joining members of the regiment, demonstrating that the importance of the diaries that they have to keep by showing them examples from the past, for instance, from the Boer War. Some officers now return to undertake history projects.

The regiment has affected thousands of local people in supply and equipment businesses etc.. In partnership with the local authority museum there is a push to assemble material relating to these local businesses.

They observe that clubs and societies are always on the lookout for interesting outings for members, and they take positive advantage of this locally. For instance they recently provided four or five tours for members of the local Rotary Club.

## 4.3 LARGE NATIONAL MUSEUMS (2)

The large national museums both receive over 10,000 collections visits a year. Two of the other national museums in the sample almost certainly fall into the top 20 per cent visitor bracket, but gave no number for users, probably because departments account for users separately. This reflects the lack of performance measurement applied to collections access and use. No particular comments were made by these two museums; it may be difficult to make valid general observations about such large organisations.

## 4.4 COLLECTIONS WITH LARGE OBJECTS (5)

These five museums are all small, with 0–10 staff, but all mentioned volunteers in their replies. *“Yes – we are a volunteer Museum and have limited resources but a professional approach!”* *“We try desperately hard to achieve a lot with limited volunteer resources. This area of history is not represented in any other way at the present time.”* *“all volunteer run in 21years!”*

Large object collections lend themselves to open access to collections for unlimited numbers, as storage is often the same as display. And, as one respondent points out, *“Our trams and buses are highly visual things when they are out. This leads to enquiries for loan or hire for individual special events. Over 14 years of operation this has increased”.*

These museums do not stand out as promoting access – only one does so strongly. Perhaps they do not need to, as the collections are more or less open as part of the visitor offer. A pertinent comment is: *“We have focused our collections policies in the last three years... Non-core exhibits have left the collection and specific acquisitions have taken their place. This improvement in quality has been reflected in improved use. We have also introduced special operating sessions and days. These are promoted as such. We also offer experience and day ‘courses’ for specific visitors, who are encouraged to become volunteers. This provides a spectrum of visitor participation.”* Asked what factors were satisfactorily dealt with, a relationship with users was much the most common choice (in other groups such a clear pattern is unusual for this question). This may reflect the extensive involvement of volunteers.

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 7

#### Creative uses

We organise Inspiration Days with local craft groups, who book an exhibition in our temporary exhibition space. They organise a meeting of their group, sometimes a whole day, sometimes an evening, when the members come to the museum and look at the collections, sometimes including objects from store laid out for them specially to see if not handle. Often we allow them to take photographs as well, without flash. The group members then respond in their own work to what they have seen - in many diverse ways! Sometimes it is images, colour or symbolism that they develop, often particular materials or techniques that they wish to try themselves. When eventually ready, their work is shown in the temporary exhibition space. Many come back to ask for more information about or look again at particular pieces they are using as inspiration.

Demand is increasing (three museums) or static (one). Three out of the five museums plan to increase access further (no details).

Obstacles identified were connected with their volunteer and independent status: *“Only allowed 4 public open days by land agents and MOD” “We are struggling to offer full access because of the problems of infrastructure and although our volunteers are always friendly and cheerful, we cannot address some issues due to funding and resources.” “It’s all down to us volunteers being available and giving our time to the ever increasing requests.”*

#### 4.5 SPECIALIST MUSEUMS (6)

These collections include costume and textiles, historic wireless and television equipment, archives relating to specific types of collection, botany and a service museum. Three are independently and three publicly financed.

None of these museums is large, the number of staff ranging from two to 20, *“Staff part-time and voluntary”*. They achieve between 400 to just over 1,300 users a year. They do tend to promote access, three fairly strongly (rating it 4 out of 5): *“I promote the collection by giving talks all over the UK mostly to family history groups. Internally we are becoming more well known and are being used by many more... than ever before.”*

Several of these collections contained quite fragile objects and their storage is problematic for open access, yet four of these museums provide stores visits for groups.

All the museums selected ‘offer access by appointment’; two of them had specially designed workplaces for studying collections. For example, one (with nine staff) explained: *“Visitors can access stored objects in our specially designated Study Rooms... by appointment or on a drop-in basis. The objects are brought to these visitors. Groups can also arrange to see objects in a special Education Room. Visitors wishing to see objects in one of our out stores can do so in the store, by appointment.”*

Three of them have experienced an increased demand for access. One comment attributes this to: *“Better awareness of collections through website and word of mouth; easier to contact us via email. Clear commitment to make collections accessible.”*

For all of them, the main obstacles to access and use are limited staff and resources.

One comment, from a museum that is part of a much larger organisation, is: *“With 1 FTE staff member for all curatorial duties, we have to target access at those who we think will benefit most – relevant subject societies, higher/ adult education, historians, scientists. Aimless visitors are directed to the exhibition except for occasional special public tours. The store was designed in the early 1980s without any facilities for displaying objects to visitors - this limits tours to 15 people so we often do back-to-back tours to fit everyone in. There is no space to set out and handle objects.”*

Thus, despite problems, it still provides for group visits.

Several of these respondents cite plans to increase access further, through enthusiastic marketing, developing a resource centre, and forming a new website with partner organisations to promote a particular under-used element of the collections.

Final remarks include:

*“We are a specialist museum widely used by enthusiasts and collectors. We have support from [a large public body] and have strong links to other museums. We find our specialist collection is generally recommended to visitors by other more general museums...”*

*“We are a unique collection which has sadly been neglected for many years. We are bringing the profile up but, as is the usual case, there is no money for this collection but we are a little happier now that we have the support of [the funding body].”*

#### 4.6 ENGLISH HERITAGE REGIONAL STORES (3)

Three English Heritage regional archaeology stores responded to the questionnaire. In 2002 English Heritage set a policy of developing access to the repositories it maintains for finds from its excavations. There can be few types of collection with so little intrinsic attraction for the public in general, yet this policy seems to have met with success since all were in the top 20 per cent user bracket. Oddly, in spite of much breast-beating about the low use of archaeological collections,<sup>75</sup> EH does not publicise the existence or availability of its finds archives and stores on its website.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Merriman, N. & Swain, H. 1999. ‘Archaeological archives: serving the public interest?’, *European Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 2, no. 2. pp. 249-267.

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/> > Research & Conservation

## Use Study 5 Conflicts of service

A specialist museum within a major national museum: it had recently reopened after extensive building works. The project's aim had been to create educational space: to achieve this the area for collections storage was reduced by about 100 square metres.

The work affected the accessibility of stored objects. Previously one store room had a work table, two computers, and easily accessible items on racking, but this has completely gone. Objects are now brought out and carried some distance to wherever the visitor can be accommodated at the time.

Still, requests to see collections items are accommodated as far as possible. The five members of the collections team look after collections visitors. Visits are not recorded. There is a large handling collection with thousands of objects.

### Policy and development

At every staff meeting the idea of store tours is brought up. Due to the refurbishment, and the consequent state of the storage areas, such projects are a long way off. More involvement with members of the public is envisioned, drawing on material from the stores, for instance temporary exhibitions created in the foyer of the museum.

### Issues

The manner in which other museum ‘purposes’ can impinge on collection storage is highlighted here, in this case a tension between education and collections. The pressure to deliver educational resources resulted in the detriment of other types of access. Ironically, an objective of the development master plan was to make the museum ‘fully accessible’.

Staff numbers are low – from two to four. The stores are accessed by between 430 and 1,300 users a year, and all three note increased demand, for instance *“Due to the personal interests of staff and recent [improvements] to the site” “We have advertised open access since 2006 to our main store and this has generated a demand.” “Access is promoted through English Heritage websites and “stores leaflets providing information about the stored collections and possibilities for research use.”*

Access is provided through the whole variety of routes, including *“Access days to sections of store once a month”. “We use the access room days to have temporary changing displays to take objects out of store and put them on display... Stores tours could be a possibility, but there is restricted space for public or large tours.”*

All three have experienced increasing demand. *“Until 2006 there was only limited access to collections by researchers, universities, adult education because the profile of the collections was low. We started a stores access project in 2006 which allows general visitors to access the collections through regular store tours.”* The respondents also clearly felt that there was more scope, identifying as obstacles the usual staff and resource issues, and: *“Lack of marketing” “There is a lack of marketing or advertising of the collections, so people are unaware of what collections we have and that they are available for research, therefore we have very few researchers.” “We have nationally significant collections from English Heritage sites all around the South East, but because no-one knows they are here, they don’t get used as much as possible.”*

## 4.7 UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS AND COLLECTIONS (6)

The university museums in the sample cover archaeology, environment, art, ethnography and mixed collections. They vary widely in size: two have one or two staff members and the others between ten and 70. The number of visitors or collection users also varies, from 400 in one of the larger museums to 2000 in a very small one.

University museums experienced a sharp decline during the late 20th century. They have been making concerted efforts in recent years

through the ICOM International Committee as well as a UK national group to create a higher profile for themselves.<sup>77</sup>

There is only one positive score for promoting access, yet all of them identify increasing demand *“It continues to increase year by year.” “Increased demand for access to drawings collection, including following digitisation and refurbishment of study room.” “Changed focus of the Museum, increased use of ‘real’ collection by education and outreach staff has resulted in increasing demands to use and access items previously stored and restricted to so-called ‘bona fide’ researchers.”*

Access is most commonly through advertised or requested public or group visits, and by appointment. Two offer the unusual route, visible storage as part of normal displays. Also, *“Access to works on paper is through a designated study room, open by appointment and fixed drop-in hours.”*

In over half of these museums the chief means to discover what is in the collections is through an online catalogue, the same number identifying the more generally prevalent route, email.

There are plans to increase use: *“... shortly launch a Resource Centre based in a gallery. This will enable researchers (academics, students, general public) to have closer engagement with the collection – items will be brought up to them and further information provided by internet and library facilities. Access to collection staff also available. This will be in a gallery area to open up the idea of research to all the Museum’s visitors.” “If funding is forthcoming, we plan to redesign our museum stores and galleries to provide additional display space, visible storage and a publicly accessible search room.” “Development of additional on site store with space for safe access, viewing and small group teaching.”*

Obstacles to increased use were the general top choice, restricted staff *“While we have commitment from senior staff, this is not always fully resourced or carried out further down the organisation”,* followed by shortage of space. Interestingly, one ‘Other’ obstacle was *“Ideology... the ‘conservative’ nature of the organisation and the approach of some curatorial and education staff are a hindrance.”*

<sup>77</sup> University Museums UK Group 2004. *University museums in the UK. A national resource for the 21st century.* University Museums UK Group



It was felt that what made the most difference to use was connection with people and organisations as users.

Concluding remarks included a reference to subject specialist curators, in general surprisingly rarely mentioned in the survey: *“Availability of subject specialist curators would undoubtedly help in promoting use of the object collections, especially for research. The library, archives and photo library are relatively well served in comparison with the museum collection, which has no full time curatorial or collections care staff. This is the major impediment to access.”* Also noted was an imbalance between the collections and interest in them *“...While most of the collection is natural history the main interest of our general visitor is anthropology - this increases the resources required to deliver within this area.”*

## 4.8 LARGE LOCAL AUTHORITY MUSEUMS (7)

These museums of their nature have a wide mix of collections. Since they depend on local funding it might be anticipated that there is a degree of pressure on them to utilize a resource that costs significant amounts of money to maintain.

Staff numbers in this group range from 17 to 200, and collection sizes from 1001 – 50,000 up to 1–5 million objects.

Collections visitors or users are from 400 to 2,500 a year. Over half of the museums in this group gave a positive score for promoting access. Media include *“Adverts in local papers, radio and TV interviews, mailing lists, door to door leaflet drop”* *“Museum website”*. Demand is static in one and increasing in six *“Due to active promotion of general public access...”*. Also noted was: *“Awareness of the content of the collection and engagement with special interest groups and individuals and academics significantly influences the use of stored collections”*; *“Location; wider knowledge of the collections in academic and research community.”*

Many of the routes for collections access were reported, most commonly visits for groups, advertised or requested, and appointments for individuals. *“Fine and Decorative Arts visitors for stored collections are usually in the region of 110-120 a year, the remainder are visitors to the stored collections at the Gallery of Costume...”*

Two offer open storage, both accessible at set times. *“...a display storage facility for domestic technology collections”*. *“The ...Study Room contains over 600 decorative art items arranged as storage on display, soon to be opened to general visitors 3 days per week.”*

On ways to find out what is in the collections, one museum offers leaflets, another notes that *“67% of collections (74% of objects) are available on-line”*. Nevertheless, the most common routes are telephone and email, *“We would dearly love to put all of our collections online and increase access to the collections, however, staff constraints and poor documentation.”*

A lot of information was offered on obstacles to increasing access in addition to limited staff, space and other resources: *“Money issue central to the problem as cost of new build facilities very high. Need to look at regional and strategic partnerships with other museums to achieve suitable economies of scale. Main problem apart from money is getting local authorities to work together in the best interests of the public and public collections. Still a problem of civic pride v. common sense”*.

Plans to increase access were reported, including more promotion, open storage and collections centres, but with some reservations: *“In the long term development strategy we would aim to have a collections centre for collections storage, care and conservation which would promote greater access to the stored collections. However this is of course subject to funding.”*

Final comments included *“We now have a facility for people to access the collections more easily and by publicizing this facility we have increased demand for access.”* But one respondent noted despondently: *“We are looking at possible shared storage with [another authority], but the reality is that our present good provision will decline because the Council does not want to continue the lease of the present main store and will relocate to less good premises in a less accessible place. We do most of the above now, but if we stimulate demand any more we will end up with dissatisfied customers because we have not got the staff to cope with any more enquiries (we get a lot more by letter, telephone and e-mail, only visits in person were quoted above).”*

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 8 Research

Invite other departments to bring visiting researchers on a tour of the collection store. With a little bit of preparation time the tours can highlight those areas of the researcher’s interest.

## Use Study 6 Management issues

The museum has just two curatorial staff. Eight years ago the collection was not organised nor catalogued at all: it is now in good order. Visits to consult the archive or see the collection are welcomed and encouraged – mostly from family history researchers but also from architects and other museums. One of the biggest problems to access of the store collections is that the public don't know what's there; therefore they are unlikely to understand that it could be of interest to them.

### Issues experienced

The staff described a common problem, echoed in even the largest collection centres. People are not aware that so much is in storage, but if they do become aware then their first thought is to wonder why it is not on display. Staff in this museum face pressure from management, who in this case are not museum professionals, to justify the existence of such a vast resource, and who question what purpose is served by stored collections.

## 4.9 SMALL LOCAL MUSEUMS (7)

Four of these are local authority funded, the others independent. They have between two and eight staff. Six are accredited or registered (one provisionally).

Despite their small size in terms of staff numbers, these museums are among the highest for collections users - between 4,000 and 7,000 a year. Since the size of their collections is between 1000–5000 and 50,000–half a million objects this cannot have been achieved by displaying all of the collections, although some of them clearly do this.

The top routes for collections access were visible storage as part of normal displays, visits for groups and by appointment for individuals. Other ways were through the Local Studies Library and *“brought out for special events – i.e. almost the whole domestic collection comes out for Family Learning Day. We also promote use of the art collection by artists.”*

Access is strongly promoted by only one of these museums. Still, six record increased demand and two a steady state. This is attributed partly to improved cataloguing and greater publicity. Three record *“Family history/ house history researchers”, “Greater local and family research”, “Local research increased enormously, with several publications”* and even *“We are seeing increasing no's of academic researchers”*.

Plans to increase access include *“long term plans to provide better and bigger facilities for the Museum and proper space for researchers which we do not have at present”* and *“Enthusiastic marketing”*. Obstacles were found to be the usual resource based ones: *“All our staff are part time volunteers, we have no paid staff, but a large number of volunteer custodians”*. Connection with users was once again high on the list of factors that made the most difference to collections use.

A number of interesting points were made in conclusion, mainly expanding on problems for small museums; but we should remind ourselves that these are achieving some of the highest collections visitor and user numbers in the whole survey:

*“Most of our collection is well used, the agricultural items are in a very poor state, and are unlikely to be further conserved. We have no space to display them, storage is of poor*

*quality. Other museums are known to have cut back on agricultural displays due to lack of public interest. There is also an unwillingness to spend further time, money or effort on them.”*

*“All staff are volunteers. Accreditation has been applied for... Location of items is hit and miss at present, but hopefully will be improved when computerisation of records is completed... It is reliant on donations only, and increasing operating costs (e.g. insurance and utilities) make it difficult to carry out too many improvements at once.”*

*“I am sure you will take into account that display in a museum gallery is not always the best way for people to access collections... Conservation issues aside, there are many factors which can make it unhelpful to the public to simply put an object in a glass case and claim it is accessible – the item may be small and detailed (e.g. coins & tokens) or need close study (e.g. archives). The key factor for public access to collections is good documentation – once a museum knows what it has and where it is, it is in a position to share this information widely and to work out how best to make each category of object accessible.”*



## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 9

#### Work in partnership

Develop partnerships with sectors outside of museums and enable them to make use of stored collections. For example, I have experience of working in the global education and global citizenship/development education sector and also with organisations working on community heritage projects. Collections could be used in a variety of ways – to aid storytelling, enhance global citizenship education work, to add value to and complement community heritage development. Museum staff often don't have the experience or the knowledge of how to approach these organisations. Some brokering needs to be done and relevant education programmes delivered. I'm involved in trying to set some of this up in my region.

### Use Study 7 – A focus on research, and inreach for groups

The specialist university museum has a very well known collection. The registrar/documentation officer is the main point of contact for collections access, advertised on the website. Curators also look after some of the visits. Enquiries are logged but visits are not, due to complexity of counting repeat visits, groups and so on. Users and uses are extremely varied.

#### The process

- An enquiry is received asking about the collections.
- A report is generated from the collections information system listing what's in the collections that seems within their sphere of interest and emailed or posted to them
- Visitor confirms what objects they think will be of most interest and an appointment is made for them to visit
- Day of the visit: registrar gets the objects from the store (the same day)
- The visitor arrives, is issued with a badge. They mostly work on the objects in the registrar's office. This is equipped with: a table with padded acid free tissue; a supply of both nitrile and cotton gloves; paper and a pencil; a digital camera; set of colour photographic scales; a laptop they can use if they want; a loupe and a magnifying lens
- They are reminded how to handle objects and asked to remove watches and jewellery.
- Depending on how valuable, fragile and portable the object is, and the level of museum training/experience of the enquirer, the registrar will keep a close eye on them, handle the object for them, or leave them to inspect it themselves
- For larger objects such as textiles another room with a larger table is used. The registrar more usually handles textiles themselves because of fragility.

Occasionally visitors will be taken into the store so that they can see what objects are in the collection and identify those they wish to be taken up to the study room.

#### In an ideal world

There would be a larger, well set up space for access, within a secure area so that things could safely be left overnight with easy trolley access to the stores. Documentation would be better. The database would have better search facilities to find what visitors are interested in – e.g. a place thesaurus – and many more objects would have images (for many users and researchers these are essential). It would hold better information, but the museum's state of knowledge about objects is often imperfect and a lot of objects are simply difficult to date. It's difficult to remedy this, but the registrar adds information received from researchers.

Staff: Since demand for access is inevitable going to be sporadic it's difficult to increase staff specifically for this. Possible solutions might be:

- Central stores specifically set up for access to stored collections
- For front-of-house staff to take on such duties, e.g. libraries where non-professional staff can fetch books. More difficult with museum objects due to need for training and security.

## Use study



## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 10 Education

A 'theatre in education' company that brings the curriculum to life have jointly developed an innovative idea – an imaginary world where Phoenix Foundation is set on destroying all evidence of the past – children select some objects to save but then find out that everything else will be destroyed. There's a fake collection assembled within the store by a maddish curator figure, Dr. Autolycus, who has taken collecting to the extreme. Which side will the children take?

## SOME MUSEUM VIEWS OF USERS

*"People if they express an interest are warmly invited to see the reserve collection."*

*"...as long as they have academic approval."*

*"Aimless visitors are directed to the exhibition except for occasional special public tours."*

*"There isn't much interest in the stored collections."*

*"Only person who researches is me"*

## A MUSEUM SERVICE

**Access to collections is a museum service. As with other services, the perspectives of the staff providing it may be very different from those of users or beneficiaries. This section explores how various groups of users found the service of accessing or using collections.**

### 5.1 FINDINGS

In all, about 100 users (research students, mail list users, Mystery Shoppers and non-curatorial museum staff) provided information that paints a picture of the experience of using or accessing collections. The research was primarily qualitative, through (sequentially) a focus group for PhD researchers, a survey questionnaire posted on email discussion lists and workshop events held as part of the project. To see how the general interested public might fare if they requested to see collections simply out of interest, some MA students and others volunteered to act as Mystery Shoppers.

Whatever the rhetoric about collections being accessible to all, in reality this service is provided in a haphazard and patchy manner. Users, especially the interested public, too seldom experience access to the 200 million items in the collections of English and Welsh museums as a public right and a valid service in which museums should excel.

Right at the start of the process, many museums do not publish a means of contact on their websites. This was reported especially by the Mystery Shoppers and also found by us when identifying appropriate contacts for the survey.

Experienced researchers, like the mail list users, may find that it is fairly easy to gain

access. Researchers such as research students who are less confident and experienced with museums may find the experience daunting and will commonly be asked to justify their request for access.

Should people have to justify their request to access a collection? How does the unfortunate enquirer become designated an "aimless visitor" (see 5.1, quotations)? They might be someone who is unable to discover exactly what to request to see because the museum's holdings are not listed in any accessible way.

Interested members of the public, the limited Mystery Shopper exercise suggests, will often find a less than enthusiastic response, or even none; or they may find a museum to be helpful and enthusiastic. There is no consistency.

Non-curatorial museum staff also found obstacles to using the collections, even though this can help to promote use. As one museum respondent commented: *"Changed focus of the Museum, increased use of 'real' collection by education and outreach staff has resulted in increasing demands to use and access items previously stored and restricted to so-called 'bona fide' researchers."*

The most common request from users (including museum professionals themselves, organising exhibitions, loans, etc.) was for collections information, preferably an object-by-object catalogue, to be available online. Museums often fear that this will lead to more demand for collections access than they can meet, but experience (apart from one very early service) is that it does not.<sup>78</sup> Users either establish that the museum does not have relevant items, or else are able to approach the museum in a much more useful way, asking better questions. Several museums recognised the usefulness of online collections information, and in comments noted that they were working to put their collections online and that they expected this to improve their service.

Once users achieve access to collections many find and appreciate a good and helpful service, sometimes rating it more highly than that in archives and record offices. Those who do not, most commonly attribute their problems to a lack of staff but there is also an unresolved issue about attitudes in museums to the public right to access the collections.

<sup>78</sup> Lejeune, B. 2007. The effects of online catalogues in London and other museums: a study of an alternative way of access. In S. Keene, ed. *Studies of stored collections in museums: Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, Special Volume 1, 79-97.

## Use Study 8 Collections use not encouraged

The use of these stored collections is not encouraged at all. The staff feel that the challenge for this very small military museum is simply to stay open for the public. Only an estimated 12 people a year actually consult the 40 per cent of the collection that is in store. Demand for access is much higher (an estimate dozen email enquiries about the collections per day) but this cannot be met due to lack of resources. Many enquiries are received about family history but this is not the kind of material held at this museum. A proportion of enquiries comes from design courses, with students studying how uniforms may have influenced fashion.

### Issues experienced

The main issue is security as the curator's predecessor 'made the mistake of opening up the collection to researchers' who were unscrupulous and messed up the filing systems, stole objects and if working on publications, the curator was not credited in the published work for all the assistance given. As a result, 'you end up thinking 'why bother?'. Collections are therefore now only made accessible to bona fide researchers supported by a personal recommendation from elsewhere. (There are also specific problems of access as the museum is on a military base.)

## 5.2 USERS' RECOMMENDATIONS

The various groups of users made many practical and positive recommendations for improving this service.

One mail list user suggested that researchers would be prepared to pay: *"Perhaps have a subscription package that gives access to groups of museums' collections in the same way as the CARN card gives access to archives offices"*.

Also suggested was that researchers and users can be a positive resource, not just a drain: *"Be open to associations with independent scholars; colleagues are predictably constrained but such 'outsiders' can bring a breath of fresh air without being threatening..."* *"maybe they should not keep so much information from investigators."* One respondent telephoned in order to underline how strongly they felt that the expertise of private collectors (with an extremely specialised type of material) was undervalued.

The difficulties for museums were understood by some: *"Give staff more research time to research and understand the scope and content of their own collections so that they can better guide outside researchers to the most appropriate material for their enquiry. Have open access with dedicated staff to allow the level of accessibility found in public archives."* *"Employ a collections interpreter who can assist people in looking at the stored collections and stay with them. Too often there are no designated staff for this kind of assistance... make their visit a worthwhile experience as some have travelled a fair distance to visit..."*.

A six point agenda for improvements was offered: *"1 – catalogue everything (even if a working title) 2 – make the catalogue available online 3 – include photos of materials (if relevant) 4 – establish procedures for facilitating such visits (what can and cannot happen) 5 – provide a designated space where the collections can be looked at 6 – try to ensure the latter has electronic sockets for digital camera/laptop usage"*. Similarly, *"On-line, searchable catalogues with photographs of the artefacts and searchable content of any published material would be the ultimate. More modestly, making a collection accessible requires the facility to be available at times of convenience to those who want to use it and staff who know what's available and how to find it. Sufficient resources to ensure all material is*

*catalogued or sorted by context so that relevant material can be found swiftly. User guides would also be useful to suggest appropriate paths open to those who want to research more individual projects like family history or the history of their property i.e. we have information on this, but for this you need library/archive/ records office/web-site etc."*

Another, simply, *"give me a quiet, well lit space to work in."*

In the **Workshops**, there was a perceived need to provide training and development, not least in familiarising the museum's own staff with what was in the collections and how objects could be brought into public programmes. Practical matters would need to be addressed, including managing groups in small stores spaces, disability access, lockers, toilets, and a reasonable level of guidance or interpretation such as information panels with guidelines. There could be different levels of access, with special events for different users. An online collections database was important, not only for outside users but also for internal use: it was observed that museums often did not know themselves what their collections included.

It was urged that getting collections out was as important as getting users in. Museum professionals seem excessively protective of their collections. Couldn't they be more open to objects being taken into unusual surroundings? For instance, an evening event had been organised in a local bar with objects relating to the black and slave trade. People who had not before encountered them were really interested in the existence of museum objects.

All the groups of users recommended better information for potential users on the practicalities: what collections can be useful for and how to go about accessing and using them. Some users may not know the practicalities of how to 'use' a collection. For instance they don't know if, when they've finished with an object, another will be brought, nor whom to ask for advice while there. Museums should explain to users why so much is not on display, the business of getting objects out of stores, and how museums work in general. This could be part of promoting the service through the museum's website and other communications channels: Who to contact? How does it work? Who does it involve? How long will it take? This was also noted in a Study visit (Use Study 13).

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 11 Creative uses and enjoyment

Could there be community websites / web pages so that groups could create their own museum based content - via a content management system or similar? There are examples of such websites - e.g. the Durham Miner - results of a project - <http://www.durham-miner.org.uk/> and Gasworks to Dome - <http://www.gasworkstodome.org.uk/> - lots of different media can be added - podcasts, blogs, ringtones from sounds that objects make maybe!, video clips, newsgroup reminders, texting etc

## THE EVIDENCE

### 5.3 THE RESEARCH

The academic research students

Three doctoral research students from UCL participated plus the facilitator, researching archaeology, art history, archives (museums), and Egyptology.

Each student had experience of using collections from several institutions. They had worked with collections of both large national collections and many small museums. A student researching in a museum archive department provided interesting perspectives both on users and on how the staff at that museum responded to and accommodated them.

#### The mail list survey

An invitation to complete an online questionnaire was sent to various email mail list discussion groups.<sup>79</sup> There were 46 respondents: well informed people with valuable experience to draw on, experienced in working with a wide range of museum collections, including some overseas. Two thirds had used archives or record offices as well. Over half (23) were affiliated to an organisation – mainly universities, some societies. Museums included overseas (especially natural history ones), a large UK national museum and a very wide range indeed of others, from small local to major regional.

#### Collection type

Museum archives, library etc	31
Research collections: archaeology, natural history	24
Photos, film, video	20
Social history, history of science, medicine	14
Fine art, paintings, works on paper, sculpture	10
Industry, technology, transport, marine	7
Ethnography, world cultures	5
Agriculture, rural life	4
Costume and textiles	2
Other	5

#### The interested public: Mystery Shoppers

However thinly stretched their resources, museums are likely to facilitate access to the collections for researchers and scholars. Yet most collections funding comes from general taxation, so should not collections be available to everyone who, mostly unwittingly, pays for them?

To investigate this, a small **Mystery Shopper** research exercise was undertaken (people act as users of services in order to make a quality assessment). All but two of the museums were in London: two national, a large independent specialist museum, an independent museum and five local authority ones. Objects requested included local history, technology, design archives, art, archaeology, textiles and photographs.

#### Non-curatorial staff and users

Non-curatorial museum staff and volunteers or members of external organisations contributed valuable observations during the Research Workshops.

### 5.4 THE PURPOSE OF THE VISIT

The **research students'** purpose was to research collections for their theses. The **Mystery Shoppers** represented the general interested public, giving reasons such as my father collects those objects, assistance with a brother's schoolwork, general interest, personal interest in design or aesthetics in detail, interest in craft technique, enjoyment of beautiful objects, want to find out about local area. The **non-curatorial museum staff users** normally wished to use objects for events or exhibits that they themselves organised (rather than curators), perhaps outside the museum.

The **mail list survey users** had very varied motives:

**Mail List Survey question:** What was the purpose of your use or access? (Fig. 5.1)

Research – academic or personal – was the most common selection for these users: writing a book or article, as an illustrator or for broadcasting. Several had worked as volunteers, cataloguing, photographing, sorting out, conserving, identifying to benefit the museum *“In every way possible: for my own research; providing reference*

<sup>79</sup> HISTORY-HERITAGE@jiscmail.ac.uk, DESIGN-HISTORY@jiscmail.ac.uk, HISTORY-CHILD-FAMILY@jiscmail.ac.uk, CHN-HISTORY@jiscmail.ac.uk, HISTORY-OF-COMPUTING-UK@jiscmail.ac.uk, ARCH-HISTORY@jiscmail.ac.uk, IMMIGRATION-HISTORY-UK@jiscmail.ac.uk, TRANSPORT-HISTORY@jiscmail.ac.uk, LOCAL-HISTORY@jiscmail.ac.uk, MILITARY-HISTORY@jiscmail.ac.uk, HIST-NAT-HIST@jiscmail.ac.uk

service; purchasing materials for collections; fundraising tours using objects; etc., etc., etc.” One had organised a visit “I have taken my science club to visit the behind the scenes collections and am working with the museum to borrow some exhibits to put on display within the science department of my school.”

Academic – research, teaching	30	43%
Personal research	11	16%
Art, design, writing, creative use	7	10%
Enjoyment or personal interest	6	9%
As a museum ‘friend’ or volunteer	6	9%
Special interest society, group etc	3	4%
School related use	2	3%
Family history	2	3%
Other – please say what	3	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>

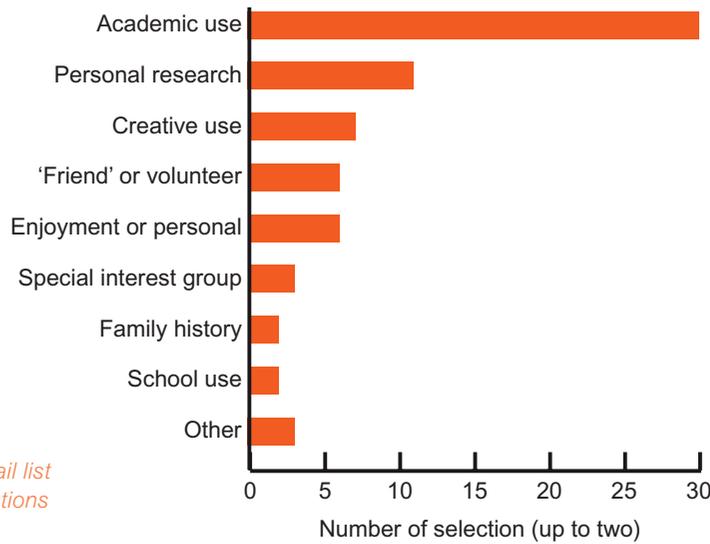


Figure 5.1  
The purpose of the mail list users' work with collections

The **mail list users** were invited to explain their interest further:

**Mail List Survey question:** Please describe why you are interested in working with collections?

### Practical, functional reasons

To learn, to understand, to research, to see the whole range of the collection, to reassess.

*“I research and write about ceramics. I also have an interest and teach on collecting practices in general (in private and in public).”*  
*“Scholarly writing; lecturing; performance”*  
*“The herbarium specimens are essential to understand the species that have been described. Also I use them to give locality information so that I can visit the places*

*that these species grow.”* *“Linking personal history to wider social history”* *“Opportunity to reassess an archaeological site when the original report had not dealt with an important aspect of its later history in sufficient detail.”* *“Museums can never show the entire range of items available to any collection. From a research point of view, it is necessary to gain access to entire ranges.”*

### Reflecting the unique nature of museum collections

Factors such as primary sources, untold stories and hidden histories, shed light on the past, reflect the spirit of the times, the only source of information.

*“They were the only source for the information I was looking for.”* *“...material is often not available anywhere else”* *“...information which has not been published elsewhere”* *“Often such collections are the only locations in which a researcher might find certain materials (e.g., the IWM film collection holds a number of unique documents related to the 1916 documentary, The Battle of the Somme... the fact that the [museum] has them pulled together \*and\* indexed according to their relationship with the film rather than in which bureaucratic organization they were generated, makes them much easier to locate and use.”* *“Essential primary sources for institutional decisions and policies on curatorial matters, past decisions informing the present form and interpretation of heritage sites; extending the range of specific categories of evidence (archive, visual and material)”* *“To access what is not necessarily apparent through catalogues and printed guides. To search for oneself to see how a collection was original assemble...”* *“I am studying the service offered by museums during the Second World War as the subject of my PhD and wanted to study primary archive evidence of the role undertaken by individual museums at this time.”*

And with a different flavour, *“...they often reflect the spirit of times, the interests of some particular person and the frame of thought of a representative person or collector and his contemporaries.”* *“a fascinating monument to the naturalists of the North East of England from 1829 to date. I am always amazed by their commitment to the study of natural history and their life stories.”* *“...they hold so many untold stories and hidden histories, shedding light on the past in terms of the cultural and natural environment, and giving us clues as to why collections were made.”*



**Personal enjoyment and interest**

Reasons with a very personal flavour formed the third group, using terms such as interested, personal history, insights, new perspectives, fascinated.

*“I work with collections as part of my PhD work – I believe they provide important insights into historical contexts.” “To gain insight into the historical trends I am studying” “Interested in variation in distribution of birds, based on voucher specimens in collections” “Because only by examining a large amount of original material can you gain access to new perspectives” “They provide a different perspective.”*

*“It’s cool!! I am an entomologist at heart but I love biology in general and am very interested in working in museums as a career.” “See a small sample representing the great diversity of our planet” “...enjoy seeing new species.” “Because of my science, but also because I am fascinated by local history.” “Is enjoyable and interesting seeing what there is”*

*And for personal and family benefit, “Gathering local history of places I knew as a child prior to emigrating to Canada, preparing a personal history/autobiography for my grandchildren.” “They’re the focus of my universe: I use them primarily for my own research, but I’m also responsible for their purchase, description, use, organization, development, etc.’*

**5.5 FINDING OUT WHAT IS IN THE COLLECTION**

For users, an important practical step is to discover where items of interest to them are held. This was explored in the museum survey (Section 3.6, above) and is further discussed in Section 7, dealing with digital issues.

The **research students** agreed that an online site providing an overview of all collections (even if not at individual object level) would be ideal. This was the role intended for Cornucopia, but no-one had heard of this

national, MLA sponsored facility. Online catalogues were deemed quite useful and the art historian noted that there had lately been a ‘real boom’ in these. However, they were less useful for those studying three-dimensional subjects such as sculpture. Digitisation poses different issues for different subjects.

Representing the interested public, the **Mystery Shoppers** had a difficult time discovering whether the collections included objects of interest: initially, whether the museum had even that sort of object (Table 5.1). Their experiences illustrate what lies behind the numerical statistics on how people find out what is in the collection (Fig. 3.9 above). It is easy for museum staff to fend off requests to see objects, for whatever reason, if the person cannot specify what they want to see, yet museums commonly make this impossible: *“One solely relies on the information given over the phone”. “I went to the museum and Reception put me through to the curator. There was no catalogue or list I could look at to see what I wanted to choose. The curator quizzed me and gradually chipped away at me until she was able to say that everything was on display.”* On the other hand, individual attention can be excellent, *“Very good I asked for a list and was sent one very promptly”.*

Useful online information was largely non-existent. The next choice is email or telephone. One **Shopper** found *“no contact numbers or emails available to the public.”* (A similar lack was found when we were identifying people to invite to take part in the survey.) But will the museum reply? Of email: *“I emailed the general contact provided on the website, explaining my interest in portrait miniatures and inquiring after any accessibility to their stored collections, however, I never got a reply back. It was only after I inquired in person at the exhibit that I was told by a front desk staff member that all their collections are 100% on public view.”*

Telephone enquiry was thought in the museum survey to be the second most likely route to this information (selected by 68 per cent of respondents), and in the user survey it was in fourth place. It was encountered by five of the **Shoppers**. *“I called up, after getting the number off 118118, and spoke to someone who worked there... She offered to pick out a selection for when I got there.”* But in another case, *“Member of staff only gave very vague and unhelpful comments and would only consider even giving me the number to call to arrange a visit to the stored collection once I had produced my Student ID to prove I was a post-graduate student.”*

Table 5.1 Mystery Shopper ratings for “it was easy to find out if the collection included the things I am interested in”.

Rating	Responses	
	In general – exhibited, images etc	To select particular objects
Very straightforward 4	6	3
3	1	1
2	2	1
Impossible 1		4

### Use Study 9 Open access storage – a typological display

The decorative arts collection had recently moved into a store that could be visited freely by the public. It was on the same site as the museum, although about 100 yards away across a large bare courtyard. A sign outside pointed to the welcoming open door, invitingly enquiring, "What's in store?".

Inside, the store was very well laid out and equipped and met all conservation requirements, with glass fronted cupboards housing the major decorative arts collection. Objects were arranged by type, with the ceramic dishes grouped, the candlesticks, boxes and so on. A brief text summary or label was provided for each group.

Only one person was in the store besides the invigilator, and it did not seem that the store attracted visitors in any number. Compared to other less strictly categorized stores this one felt barren and visually unstimulating. Objects so systematically grouped somehow left nothing for the viewer to do. It was hard to work up an interest in these objects segregated as they were as though in an old fashioned department store.

Use study

*"No online information about the museum collection whatsoever, no information in the museum, no paper catalogue. Relied entirely on speaking to the collection staff (who never returned my phone calls) to find out exactly what was present."* One **research student** who was working with a museum archive commented that demand was controlled by curators' tardy response to enquiries.

Three of the Shoppers were able to specify more exactly which objects were of interest (and thus avoid the epithet 'aimless'? – see opening quotes to this section), but four found it impossible. *"Website had list of designers featured in the museum" "There were some examples of the portrait miniatures that were on display on the museum's website. However, I could not determine whether or not they had a stored collection I could access."*

How Mystery Shoppers found out about specific objects	
Museum's collection list online	1
Email with published contact	1
Telephone enquiry	2
No detailed information available	3
Other	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>

The **Shoppers** were asked whether the museum had helped them in other ways to find out if their objects were of interest (Table 5.2). Experiences were sharply divergent. This polarisation between excellent person attention and none at all is a strand that runs through all of the user surveys.

The mail list user survey explored these issues further, asking:

*From experience, what is the MOST LIKELY WAY to find out what is in the collection that might be of interest to you?*

**YOUR OWN PREFERENCE:** how would you like to find out what's in collections?

Ratings: Asked about my interest and made...	Responses
...helpful suggestions 4	3
3	
2	
...no suggestions 1	3
No answer	3

Table 5.2 Mystery Shopper ratings for: "The museum was helpful in identifying what in their collections might be of interest".

The match between the preferred and most likely means is not close. One-to-one email was the most likely way to find out what was in collections, but nearly 50 per cent of respondents said they would rather use online catalogues for this. This is further discussed in Section 7.3.

Asked for a final recommendation on what would most improve this service, out of 46 respondents, 25 made their top suggestion better information about collections, preferably online listings: *"With online catalogues, the [national museum] collection is much easier to use (although the online catalogue is still incomplete)." "National museums largely offered a comparable service [to libraries and record offices] but local museums often had poor awareness of the extent of their archive material and collections were poorly stored and rarely catalogued."* *"Fairly easy to get responses, but archives and records offices are far more open about their holdings."* *"There are some wonderful resources at museums but it can be hard to find out what is where, especially at smaller museums. Museum staff have generally been more helpful than staff at larger archives."*

### 5.6 GAINING ACCESS TO THE COLLECTIONS

The next step is to contact the relevant person in the museum and make an appointment to visit and see or work with objects.

The **research students** agreed that knowing a well-established scholar to introduce you or to help you gain access was a great help, or even an essential. Many places still advocate the necessity to be a bona fide scholar, although there are alternative arrangements - the British Museum prints and drawings room is open to anyone to walk in. One researcher noted that although the museum she worked with aspires to provide greater access, in practice it remains limited to a few academics.

The museum staff are afraid of creating demand over and above what they can cope with: so for instance, the telephone is left to ring unanswered.

The **mail list users** mostly volunteered (unprompted) in text replies that access was easy (they were experienced researchers, however), but a few had not had such a good experience: *"Difficult in gaining access, Difficult in obtaining working space, Difficult in accessing knowledgeable staff"*.

*“Frustrating to gain initial access. Often curators assume what their visitors want rather than presenting them with a range of options.”*

How about the general public? Were the **Mystery Shoppers** asked to justify their request (Table 5.3)? Once again, their experience was sharply polarised. Only one **Shopper** was really challenged: *“I was asked whether I had a legitimate reason for my enquiries and then instructed to buy a book on local history. Only after I had given a reason, established my credentials and bought the book (£3.50, moderately helpful) was I even given the phone number for the archives... and they never returned my calls”*. It seems excessive for an enquirer to be made to buy a book before they are even given the relevant telephone number – in a local authority museum!

Table 5.3. Mystery Shopper ratings for “I felt that the museum welcomed my interest ...”

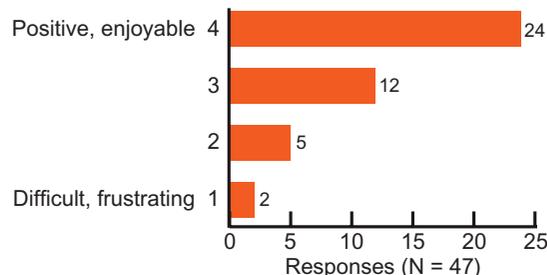
Rating: My request seemed...	Responses
Welcome 4	3
3	1
2	
Problematic 1	3
No answer	2

### 5.7 THE VISIT

The **research students** found that once a visit had been agreed curators enjoyed sharing enthusiasm by speaking to people with specialist knowledge. Also when asked ‘have you got anything else’ the curators are *“more than accommodating and indeed start to really think about the enquiry then, on the spot.”* Facilities varied from extremely comfortable to cold and difficult of access.

**Non-curatorial users** in the workshops noted that a major pleasure from encounters with collections is the unexpected connections that are possible. These arise, for instance, from artists making installations from collections objects (white objects, round objects).

Figure 5.2. Mail list user ratings for “How would you rate your experience?”



But participants questioned, *“why can’t anyone do this, create displays or artworks from objects selected by them? Why only artists?”*

The **mail list users** had had a range of interesting experiences:

*Finally, how would you rate your experience of using or accessing stored collections?*

Most respondents were very positive (Fig. 5.2). Helpful, knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff were mentioned many times – in one case *“the only positive is staff”* – and the general experience is praised. *“In my own field I find that the enthusiasm for collections-based research is very strong amongst the professionals responsible for them. Consequently gaining access has never been problematical.”*

However, others had had negative or partly negative experiences: *“However, there have also been some difficult and frustrating experiences where individual museum staff have positively discouraged my research visit or have only released the minimum of archival material and I have sensed that there was more material available but they were not interested in assisting me. This was only in a few cases, however.”* *“It has run the gamut. Sometimes I’ve had great success and fun; other times it’s been like pulling teeth. I’ve been both stonewalled as well as quietly assisted, despite the ‘rules.’ I’ve even had discreet conversations and even follow-up phone calls telling me about material I might be interested in. In one case, I was finally tipped off that some materials were being withheld from me and where I could find them. I had just two hours to go through that file cabinet. But it made all the difference. The whole thing has been an experience akin to a spy novel.”*

It has to be concluded that museums provide very variable levels of service for users wishing to access their collections.

### 5.8 MUSEUM COLLECTIONS COMPARED TO RECORD OFFICES AND ARCHIVES

The **mail list users** were further invited to compare experiences of record offices and libraries with museum collections. Unlike museums, record offices and libraries have collections use as their primary purpose.

## Use Study 10 Difficulties with education use of university collections

Publicly a university with diverse collections encouraged and promoted their use in research and teaching, yet students found serious obstacles with some collections when they came to ask to work with objects for exhibitions and projects. There was prior discussion and notice from the course coordinators, yet in the case of one collection the curators strongly resisted the use of objects, at one point suggesting that the students should attend a special course before they were allowed to even consider them. In other instances an appointment was not offered within the timescale for the student's project.

From the student's viewpoint this was disappointing, and they found it difficult to understand the apparent resistance to their accessing the collections. Their tutor pointed out that this was useful experience - it was not uncommon in museums for the curator of the collection to be possessive and protective, and for other would-be users to have to conduct negotiations in order to include objects in an exhibition or a programme curated by someone else.

From the curators' viewpoint they were very busy and found it difficult to find the time to deal with students from another department. Some objects had been collected from source communities and the curators felt that only they understood the messages that the objects embodied.

Have you used or worked with similar collections in other places, i.e. record offices or archives? Yes 30 No 15

How did the experience compare?

Some respondents said the experience was the same or similar, others that they were simply different. *"Record offices are set up for large scale consultation of documents, whereas museums, especially small museums, can provide better, more personalised service, but may not have the staff resources to do this. On one occasion it was clear that my research was using staff time that was not really available."* *"In the best museums, (York, California) the experience is very similar... Many other museums have too much stuff and too little staff to do adequate cataloguing and for some storage is an issue."*

Eleven people said that their museum experience was preferable. Reasons were that it was more informal, museum staff were very helpful... knowledgeable... approachable... obliging (qualified by saying, once access has been gained), and that one was often trusted to browse through the collections rather than ordering specific items from a catalogue. *"Whilst I was working at [a national museum] I was a regular user, so trusted with access that most users wouldn't get; I was able to peruse the collections at my leisure and find connections that might otherwise not have been obvious through a catalogue..."* *"I took the experience with museums leisurely. It was a lot more interesting and engaging, while places such as archives and record offices are tuff places, where every day's work is much harder, tedious and difficult."*

A further eleven mail list survey respondents preferred archives and record offices. Reasons frequently given were: general efficiency, staffing and organisational accessibility. *"Access is often quicker at record offices - perhaps because it is their raison d'etre"* *"Public record offices and archives have more efficient systems (computer and reading rooms) in place including staff whose sole role is to accommodate researchers."* (In one of the project workshops a participant said that they had accomplished many times more in record offices than in museums.)

The non-curatorial museum staff users who attended the workshops had further experience to contribute. A few non-curatorial staff –

education, events etc – provided examples of how they are prevented from accessing even the object database, let alone the stores. This seems to be a common experience: anecdotally, comments on this have been noted from many different sources.<sup>80</sup>

Some people working with external organisations, even if they had themselves worked in museums, had found resistance to allowing them to access or engage with collections.

## 5.9 USERS' EXPERIENCE COMPARED

As the research progressed it became apparent that these different user groups' experiences had much in common. They are discussed in terms of the various processes involved in accessing and / or using museum collections.

### The research students

These users were as yet not established scholars. All called for online access to collections contents in order to plan their visits most effectively. They had found that they needed to justify their request to access objects – there could be resistance to this, even though these are just the sort of users who could be expected to add value to collections. It was helpful, or often essential, to have a letter of introduction from a supervisor. There was a common view that museums were doing their best in the face of inadequate resources.

### The mail list users

One comment encapsulated many points made: *"Museums need to be far more aware of the wealth of their archival collections and their potential to researchers and local historians. They need to publicise the contents of their stored collections more widely via their websites and encourage far greater use of their stored collections through better publicity about access arrangements. A dedicated space for people to study the collections is ideal, preferably with a member of staff on duty to assist researchers. Many of the national museums do this already but it is also possible for local museums to do the same - Norwich Museums Study Centre works on this basis and provides an excellent example of the type of accessible service that other local museums could provide."*

<sup>80</sup> Blackstock, S. 2004. Collections and diversity, discussion paper for the Museums Association enquiry, Collections for the future. Quoted in: S. Keene, 2006. All that is solid? Museums and the post-modern. *Public Archaeology* 5: 3, pp. 185-98.

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 12 Enjoyment

Collections of sound can be stored and exhibited at the same time! Objects could be reunited with their sounds whether in store or on display without calling down the ire of the conservators... especially in open air / building museums, the oral history or object sounds can be played as a subtle background ...artists are good at using sound in interesting ways these days...

### The general public (the Mystery Shoppers)

The **Mystery Shoppers** had sharply polarised views of their experiences, two rating it an excellent service to the public, two quite good and two poor. *"The overall experience was pleasant. Although, because of my choice of objects, I did not get to go behind the scenes of the actual museum, when talking to the museum staff over the phone they were very helpful and offered their full availability (even if the museum is due to close by the end of the year)."* *"The museum was an interesting local collection with several fascinating exhibits... There was absolutely no information available regarding the reserve collection and the staff I spoke to was very unhelpful and clearly struggling to cope with the large school party in the museum at the time of my visit. Phone calls were not returned and no further contact entered into by the museum. A very poor service at the moment, a problem I suspect to be the result of poor staffing".*

### Do museums welcome collections users? If not, why not?

**Workshop participants** felt that there were variations in access for different types of museum and collection, dependent on varied and formal or informal customer care standards. The collection manager or curator plays the role of gatekeeper, which can be off-putting – but they can also be a wonderful resource, providing value-added responses and putting the user in touch with other interested users and experts.

There may be a worry for curators about not having the knowledge and expertise to provide informed access to objects, they said, – but why not embrace user knowledge and interest to add to knowledge?



### Use Study 11 Effects of publishing collections information

My museum service holds the largest public collection of Ruskin Pottery in the country. For many years very few people were aware of the collection's existence, even within the local area. Limited marketing and publicity budgets made it virtually impossible to advertise the collection. My service received relatively few enquiries about the collection and even fewer visitors who were coming to see it.

In January 2007 I took the decision to publicize the Ruskin Pottery collection by creating an on-line exhibition on my service website. I commissioned high quality photographs of the objects and these were uploaded onto the site. I produced interpretation pages and most importantly included a direct point of contact for the collection. The corporate web team created the site: they were delighted to be involved in a creative project that was a little different from their normal schemes of work. The total cost for the project was £400.00.

Since the launch of the website in April 2007 enquiries relating to the Ruskin Pottery collection have increased by over 50%. Over 75% of all collection enquiries are now about the Ruskin Pottery collection. I also receive enquiries from all over the world: these too are increasing in number.

Visitors are now coming from outside the borough to see the collection. One person travelled over 5 hours to see the permanent exhibition. Local people are now aware of the significant collection on their doorstep. Researchers are using the collection for their own studies. The most important outcome is that people are now discovering for themselves the beauty of Ruskin Pottery.

## Use Study



This section returns to collections, and addresses the questions, what collections are used, who uses them, and for what purpose?

## 6.1 DISCUSSION

The collections of museums vary greatly in nature and in proportions in storage, and in the amount of use they receive.

Museums reported their collections being used in many different ways, with research the most frequent, by academics, individuals or for commercial purposes.

These statistics indicated that some collections were less easily accessible than others. Some were also identified as less accessed: in particular, geology and ethnographic collections. The inaccessibility and low use of ethnography collections is something of a puzzle and should be a matter for attention considering the ethical considerations attached to holding collections from other source communities.

There were some interesting examples of uses of collections that were specific to particular museums, and some others are further explored in the Examples.

## THE EVIDENCE

### 6.2 COLLECTIONS IN STORAGE

**How do people find out what is in the collections?**

*Q.13 In this question we would like to know details of the main collections and their storage.*

*Exclude unaccessioned bulk archaeological material*

*Exclude the museum's own records and documentation*

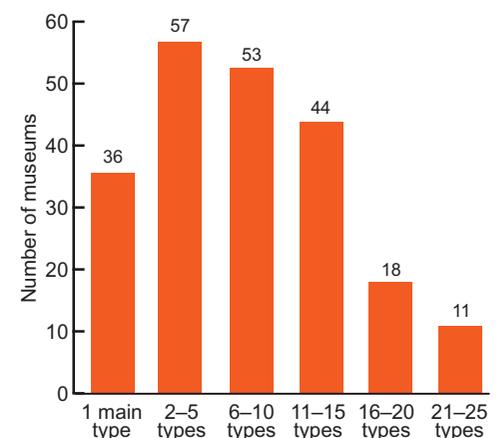
*First, is there one main collection, or is it a mixed collection?*

The museum survey asked respondents to provide various items of information about the collections. The information from our survey is generally in line with the DOMUS survey, and also with the various mapping exercises that have been conducted in a number of regions (Table 6.1 and Appendix 1).

Collection	Frequency
Photographs	97
Social history	89
Archives	84
Costume and textiles	74
Archaeology	74
Fine art	71
Coins	59
Library	58
Art on paper	55
Decorative arts	49
Military	43
Natural history	42
Geology	41
Oral history	39
Industry	39
Sculpture	35
Personalia	33
Agriculture	32
Ethnography	31
Transport	30
Film	27
History of science + medicine	26
Music	16
Maritime	13

*Table 6.1. Collections in the sample in order of frequency*

The responses also provided information on how many types of collection museums had (Fig. 6.1); i.e. 36 museums had one main collection type; 57 had two to five types, and so on.



*Fig. 6.1. Frequency of numbers of types of collection in museums.*

Alice Stevenson

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 13

#### Creative uses

The local history group produce a newsletter and there is a lot of associated research, and we have a regular author who writes local books.

### How much is in storage?

Many of the mapping exercises referred to in Section 2 encompassed investigations into storage, but this has been primarily from the perspective of 'care of collections' (security and environment). Few studies, with exceptions (the Yorkshire & Humberside decorative art collections report)<sup>81</sup> have addressed access to stored collections.

Our survey found that 95 per cent of some collections (oral history, film, ethnography, geology and photographs) were kept in store (Appendix 3). The results broadly mirrored the DOMUS one in 1999,<sup>82</sup> which found that social history, fine and decorative arts collections were most likely to be part of displays. For oral history and film a high proportion in store is predictable, but it was surprising to find that of 31 ethnography collections in our sample, 20 had 95–100 per cent in store. (The DOMUS survey found that ethnography, numismatics, medicine and music collections were not displayed by over 40 per cent of museums that

contained those collections). While storage is of course necessary, special measures will be needed for people to access or make use of the objects. Respondents were asked only to include accessioned material, not non-accessioned bulk material such as archaeology or archive papers.

Access is easier if a store is on site. The collections that were most frequently reported as off-site (Table 6.2) were agriculture (35 per cent of agriculture collections off-site), ethnography (33 per cent) and maritime (30 per cent). Ethnography collections, as we saw above, were also one of the top three types of collection to have most in storage, so this suggests that these were some of the least accessible types of collection in the survey. Table 6.2 compares the ranking of collections with a high percentage in store with that for collections stored off-site. Where a collection is near the top in both rankings, such as ethnography and geology, this suggests that the collection may be particularly inaccessible.

Table 6.2. Rankings compared of the proportion of collections where 95–100 per cent were in store, and the proportion of those collections stored wholly off-site. Links are to positions of the top collections in each ranking.

	No. of museums with collection	% with 95–100% in store		% of individual collections stored offsite	
Oral history	39	82%		35%	Agriculture
Film	27	74%		33%	Ethnography
Ethnography	31	61%		30%	Maritime
Geology	41	61%		29%	Industry
Photographs	97	61%		24%	Archaeology
Coins	59	59%		22%	Transport
Library	58	52%		21%	Music
Art on paper	55	51%		19%	Geology
Natural history	42	50%		18%	Natural History
Costume + textl.	74	49%		15%	Coins
Hist. of science	26	46%		15%	Hist. of science
Archaeology	74	45%		14%	Social History
Personalialia	33	36%		13%	Library
Industrial	39	33%		13%	Sculpture
Sculpture	35	31%		12%	Decorative Arts
Maritime	13	31%		11%	Photographs
Military	43	30%		11%	Fine Art
Agriculture	32	28%		11%	Personalialia
Fine art	71	27%		10%	Art on Paper
Music	16	25%		9%	Film
Social history	89	24%		9%	Archives
Decorative arts	49	22%		9%	Military
Transport	30	20%		4%	Oral History
Archives	84	0%		0%	Costume + textl.

<sup>81</sup> YHMC 1997. *Objects with visual ambition*. Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council.

<sup>82</sup> Carter, S., Hurst, B., Kerr, R., Taylor, E., & Winsor, P. 1999. *Museum focus. Facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 2*. MGC. Chart 2.8.

### 6.3 LEAST USED COLLECTIONS

**Q.19** What would you say are the least used parts of your collections? N=177 (Table 6.3)

Geology collections were most often mentioned as least used: out of 41 museums having those collections 21 said this type was least used. This was followed closely by archaeology, where out of 74 collections in all 25 cite it as least used (11 of these specified 'bulk archaeology'). After those came social history and costume and textiles. Ethnography collections again feature, with the fourth least used score. The top three under-used collections here were also essentially research archives. However, the experience of the English Heritage stores, described above, shows that even such unpromising material as archaeology research collections can engage people. Geology collections were one of the

types with a high proportion in store, and also stored off site.

Other remarks included that all of the collections were used; 22 mentions of very specific parts of single subject museum collections; that there were collections management and access issues (e.g., stored off-site, toxic, fragile); collections unaccessioned or uncatalogued.

These perceptions were not wholly consistent with the reports on usage of collections (Appendix 4). Some museums report 'social history collections' as those least used, yet in the more detailed question on use history collections (in general) appear to be the most used. Almost all social history collections were in local authority and independent museums, which tend to have fewer collections users (above, Section 3.5, Fig. 3.7).

Table 6.3. Numbers of museums with collections and those citing collections as 'least used'. Ranked by 'least used'.

	Number of museums citing collection as 'least used'	Per cent of collections 'least used'	No. of museums with collection	Comments
Geology	20	49%	41	
Archaeology	25	34%	74	Bulk material (11)
Natural history	11	26%	42	
Ethnography	6	19%	31	
Social history	14	16%	89	
Costume + textl.	9	12%	74	
Coins	7	12%	59	
Decorative arts	4	8%	49	Arms and armour
Fine art	5	7%	71	
Photographs	5	5%	97	
Archives	4	5%	84	
Oral history	2	5%	39	
Library			58	
Art on paper			55	
Military			43	
Industrial			39	
Sculpture			35	
Personalia			33	
Agriculture			32	
Transport			30	
Film			27	
Hist. of science			26	
Music			16	
Maritime			13	

## 6.4 COLLECTIONS USES AND USERS

**Q.20** Please tell us about the uses and users of stored collections. Exclude normal museum display and exhibition. Exclude loans. Include borrowing of objects by members of the public to create exhibitions or displays in their own location.

Uses & users	Frequent	Sometimes	Rarely	Total selections
<b>RESEARCH</b>				
Academic	75	87	23	185
Unaffiliated researchers	57	84	27	168
Commercial (e.g. auction houses, developers)	8	37	79	124
Unknown	6	20	18	44
<b>EDUCATION, SOCIAL BENEFIT</b>				
Adult / informal	40	85	27	152
Universities or colleges	42	66	33	141
Schools (stored collections only)	31	51	57	139
Unemployed etc.	2	21	61	84
<b>MEMORY, IDENTITY</b>				
Military service history	15	30	48	141
Individuals/ family history	56	82	28	139
Public occasions	10	47	52	84
<b>CREATIVITY</b>				
Film / TV	19	55	63	137
Artists	22	72	39	133
Authors	15	51	48	114
Craftspeople, designers	14	39	43	96
<b>ENJOYMENT</b>				
Local people, volunteers	64	66	14	141
Special interest groups	47	87	20	139
"Friends" of the museum	27	60	28	84
<b>Key: Number of selections</b>				
	Less than 50	50+ selections	70+ selections	

Table 6.4. Number of respondents selecting categories of uses and users of stored collections.

The categories of uses and users are similar to those developed in *Fragments of the World*, where they are fully discussed.<sup>83</sup>

The user categories against which the highest use is recorded were those who may be expected to have an interest in a particular type of collection: special interest groups, academic and other researchers. However, it is encouraging that all categories of use and user were represented, with some top occurrences in each.

The uses of collections types are shown in Appendix 4. Different collections were popular with different types of user, as might be expected. Most selected overall was 'History'. This included social history, history of science and medicine, local history and similar variations; yet social history collections were the third most often identified by museum respondents as 'least used' collections. Second were art collections (again, all types, fine art, art on paper, decorative arts). These were also the most frequent collections in museums so were more likely to be cited as used. The least selected collections were natural history and ethnography. Ethnography collections as discussed above were also those with the largest proportion stored off site and their low usage may be of some concern.

Other collections reported as used included some related to military history, ephemera (16) and library (35), and history of science and medicine (21). 'All' or 'all collections' was reported in nearly 150 responses, but 'all' could equally be all of a specialist collection or of a wide variety of collections, depending on the type of museum.

## 6.5 PARTICULAR USES AND USERS

The survey requested:

**Q.20:** Please tell us about any type of use, or user, that is particular to your collections.

A rich variety of uses was revealed by the 92 museums that provided further information. A number gave details of higher education users – students writing dissertations, PhD students, classes or visits for students. A participant in Workshop 1 described the intense interest in a collection from the TV series, *Robin Hood*. Visitors had been known to head straight from their aeroplane at Heathrow to the museum collection.

<sup>83</sup> Keene, S. 2005. *Fragments of the world: the uses of museum collections*. Elsevier.

A number of unique special collections were mentioned that are of great value to researchers, some internationally:

Polar research  
 Action Man  
 The best caving collection in the UK  
 Archery  
 Police  
 Children's literature  
 Imperial Russian art collection  
 Workhouse records  
 Border rivers  
 Personal collections - PG Woodhouse, Gertrude Jekyll, Jack Phillips (radio operator on the Titanic)  
 Particular art collections such as pierhead paintings

to those involved with past employment: *"Ex-miners in local community are frequent visitors to open access store and can identify with industrial machinery on show". "The collection is unique in that we preserve working practices if not social activities in their setting and environment. People regularly come to experience this which cannot be achieved in any other way."* *"Police Officers for Borough based 'Open Days', TV, Film and Theatre companies, museums mounting exhibitions with a Police theme."* Others simply used the collections in local events: *"It is mainly local and specialist groups that are interested. For instance, a group from the red cross borrows items for their displays, and the friends group sometimes borrows things for use at stalls at fetes etc."* *"persons requiring vintage transport for their event"* and the museum as community focus: *"[the town] is a strong stable community with many people having been here for generations, and the museum tries to reflect that."*

Valuable work with those with special needs was identified in some comments: *"special needs groups and individuals have actively engaged with the collections during workshops that will inform the development of the Gallery - this has included groups with brain damage, motor-neurone disabilities, wheelchair users, adults with Alzheimer's, people with autism and groups with learning difficulties."* *"older people with dementia related illness from residential care in 6 South London boroughs"* *"Reminiscence and rehabilitation groups"*.

Groups or individuals with special interests also make good use of collections: *"Action Man enthusiasts"* *"It's mainly the special interest groups. For instance we recently have opened a dialogue with the local botany groups so at least some of the natural history collection is being accessed whereas before not so much. These objects probably wouldn't be of interest to the general public but to the specialist they are of great interest."* *"uniforms looked at by embroiderers."* *"A level textile students, City and Guilds Patchwork and Quilting students, informal patchwork and quilting groups"* *"musical instrument makers and designers"* *"Medical museums, The Association of Anaesthetists"*.

Some uses gave rise to museum events: *"We have an exhibition on at the moment with paintings by a lady who used the costume collections at the museum for inspiration."*

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 14 Enjoyment and social benefits

The large number of work experience students we have had has spread the word that the collections are available to a younger audience. The arts collections (costume and Japanese) along with natural history and archaeology are popular items for research, study, replica making and drawing and photography. ...The main users of the collections in store are the Friends and volunteers at the museum who assist each of the three Keepers with collections management, documentation and packing.

As expected, family and local researchers received mention, not always favourable. *"Most users want information about their family or dwelling. They want it free, and fast, and are rarely disposed towards contributing to its maintenance or development. Their attitudes towards archived material are cavalier rather than educated. In this (its fourth) decade, the Museum's limited resource has been directed towards conservation and security rather than outreach."* Inexperienced researchers do bring problems: *"Many family historians appear to be non-regular users of museums, libraries and archives and their interest in family history has brought them to the museum, they require different help compared to the many military specialists who wish to study particular examples of uniform, insignia etc."* *"We do get people ringing up asking about their gran or similar who lived in the museum and they just expect us to be able to turn up the answer."* Other experiences were more encouraging: *"Gypsy Travellers to see our Gypsy Wagons and Gypsy Floral Tribute"*. And, always a challenge for collections management and documentation: *"descendants of donors of objects"*.

Another substantial group was local users, from professional: *"The [buildings] Conservation Officer often sends architects and homeowners to us to consult the photographs when looking for evidence of former appearance"*

*"We have lots of users but we do work with Fencing Clubs with the edged weapons collection and we hold a course for underwater archaeologists to identify cannons by feel." "200m from the relatively new arts centre - get involved with them".*

*"The museum gives guided hands-on access to stored collections that have been grouped according to themes. Only the surgical instruments that are dangerous are not accessed at any point by hand. This in itself is presented to artists as a potentially documentable dilemma with which they sometimes like to engage (via photographic media etc)".*

Finally, some museums mentioned the wide range of users and uses that they serve: *"Dissertation students, volunteers, Cold War researchers/enthusiasts, archaeological researchers/academics".*



## Use Study 12 – A regional resource centre

A partnership between a museum and a museum service, the large store was purpose built with the aid of HLF funding. It houses 3D collections and also books, photographs and oral history. There is a team of 5 people for access and outreach, some Hub funded.

### Collections management

A very well organised and managed store where the collections are being actively developed, in the sense of being enhanced by better documentation, linking e.g. oral history collections with the physical collections, promoting links with users. Efficiency shows in the figures for users – in 6 months:

Via outreach: 34 groups = 821 individuals

Group visits: 52 groups = 1208 individuals

Independent researchers 25

Visiting and collections use

People book visits to examine objects in a study room, no criteria as to who can do this. Regular store tours and visits as well. Positive about loaning objects for community use. There is a strong local sense of community due to the dominant industries of the region, and important parts of the collections reflect this. Outreach is important as well – objects are very regularly taken out to interested groups.

### Community collections

A free facility for residents of the region to store their collections. They are required to document them, adopt proper pest control measures, and access them – if they abandon the collection they are asked to find another store facility. Training days and sessions are provided (a popular service).

### Promotion

Through roadshows, in local libraries, in any contact with people whom they encourage to become advocates for the service. Strong strategy of developing collections information online – including movie clips of objects in use, or of particular skills being used.

### Users

A lot of interest from local people – a number of higher education courses, e.g. history, design, costume and fashion, business studies, museum studies, photography, set design. A volunteer coordinator organises these contacts, including with courses. Social users include women prisoners – creative art.

### Issues

- The rural location is a challenge – difficult for people to get to. They regularly bring groups etc to the store, providing transport.
- The collections access officers are externally (Renaissance) funded.

# Use study

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 15

#### Creative uses

The museum gives guided hands on access to stored collections that have been grouped according to themes. Only the surgical instruments that are dangerous are not accessed at any point by hand. This in itself is presented to artists as a potentially documentable dilemma with which they sometimes like to engage (via photographic media etc).

### Use Study 13 – On site study centres

The county museum service set up study centres for collections access and use fairly recently, taking advantage of space that became available when offices and collections were moved out of the adjacent main museum site. To the Director of the service it was a natural priority to promote services using the collections. The Council are supportive because they see that the service can engage with many different agenda to support priority disadvantaged groups, such as those mentioned below.

#### Practical arrangements

Four Study Rooms cater for each of the collections on the site - normal large rooms with tables, chairs etc. Due to shortage of space curatorial staff also work in them and carry out collections management work. This is found to be a great advantage as staff are thus on hand to look after researchers. The study rooms also offer places for staff coffee breaks etc.

#### Achievements

Collections users have increased from 1094 in 2002/3 to 3267+ in 2007-8. The museum staff are extremely proud of this. They feel there should be even more users, but have to admit they are almost at capacity to provide services of high quality.

#### Uses and users

There is a very wide variety of users: individual researchers (by appointment), volunteers working on the collections, hands on workshops for over 55s (e.g., Fabulous Finds, Collecting the World, Scientific Illustration). Special groups include young offenders, those suffering from mental illness, University of the 3rd Age, Association for the Blind, and others. There are store tours for groups. No distinction is drawn between 'serious researchers' and others with a passing interest.

#### Promoting the services

Leaflets and a dedicated section of the website advertise the service: "What we provide: Access to collections; specialist knowledge and support; private study rooms; study aids such as microscopes and computers". It is also promoted via connections with freelance tutors, often taken on to conduct tours, classes etc, and with local colleges and university departments. The Access Officer offers 'Taster sessions' and for instance through one of these the University of the 3rd Age organiser arranged for a series of study mornings. More and more of the collections are also being listed online. However, there has been concern that if promoted too hard they may not be able to cater for demand.

#### Staff and expertise

This service really took off when Renaissance funding enabled an Access Officer to be appointed. A dedicated person is considered key to success, as they have time to cultivate connections, to organise events and generally make it easy for curators to take part – and they are a key contact point for collections services generally. Store tours etc have been conducted by the museum Interpretation Team, but the presence of curators with specialist knowledge, and people who can answer questions in depth etc has also proved very important to the experience.

#### Issues experienced

- In their experience, users are best catered for in contact with curators, although facilitation by other staff is essential.
- A drop-in service for researchers wishing to work with collections is not realistic – it takes time to find relevant objects, perhaps look up references etc..
- They feel they are verging on demand exceeding capacity, although they would dearly like to have more users.

The most challenging issue is how to put across to potential 'users' what is in the collections and why they might be interested in them. Comprehensive catalogue listings, though necessary, are not sufficient, as inexperienced people feel overwhelmed by the quantity. Perhaps examples of what people have done would help.

## Use study



Photo: M Thomson

*"Listing of material I believe to be priority whether images area available or not as this allows visitors to structure their own visit and gain the most from available resources. These issues for a small museum can be then dealt with accordingly e.g. if there is a special interest in ointments, an enquirer may need to see supplementary materials on line or show interest in the development of accessioned materials (help a museum collect etc!)."*

– Museum survey respondents

*"The web has transformed the way in which people find the collection. It is particularly useful as most people don't expect us to hold historic or ethnographic collections and find us by accident. An online database would enable visitors to the store to sift specimens beforehand - at present finding relevant material ('baskets', 'items from Japan') involves much moving of storage racks."*

**Online and digital media obviously have the potential to facilitate access to collections, and users attach importance to them (see Section 5.7). This section will look at museum collections listed online. First, we discuss users' preferences for finding out about collections. Then an evaluation of survey museums' online collections information is presented. Finally, users were asked their opinions of collections information online.**

## 7.1 FINDINGS

### Finding out what is in collections

By far the most users would prefer to find out what was in collections via online listings or catalogues. In their experience, however, the most likely routes were individual email followed by telephone enquiry. Curators themselves judged telephone enquiry to be the most used route, but this may be because it intrudes on their work and is thus noticed more. There was comfort for those fearing the demise of expert curators: a museum's published catalogue was a popular wish.

### Museums' online catalogues

**Q.22:** Are the collections listed online, at either collection or object level? If so, what percentage of the collection is online in either case?

Out of 263 museums, 66 replied that their collections were online at some level. In 23 websites no online collections listing could be found. In four the specific webpage could not

be located after an extensive search and in others the website was down at the time of the enquiry. Consequently, out of the 66 websites 43 were found to offer at least some minimal collections information. These resources ranged from complete databases to basic content of various types. They were evaluated against five criteria: accessibility of resources; design; user-friendliness; type of information per item; representation of the collections.

The results of this evaluation were generally encouraging. Of the 43 evaluated websites 34 offered collections resources that were easy to access; 31 a fair representation of the physical collections; 26 were user-friendly and 25 provided adequate information on individual items. However, room for improvement in the design of resources was found in thirteen websites.

### Evaluation with users

Users were further asked what features they considered most important about online catalogues, and about good and poor experiences with them. Helpful features were deemed to be, (by number of selections), object data, usability, provision of quality images and accessibility. Retrieval speed was another important consideration.

Unhelpful features included inaccurate or incomplete data, awkward provision for searching, websites difficult to use, the catalogue hard to find within the website, technical problems and bad design.

## 7.2 CONCLUSIONS

For would-be collections users, it would assist collections use if collections information was available online in the form of standard catalogue type listings. Use Study 11 shows how this measure can greatly boost appreciation and interest in a collection.

User-friendly online catalogues are a desirable aspiration for cultural institutions because they promote a flow of ideas that can lead to interesting discoveries about the collections and contribute to audience satisfaction. From a practical yet not negligible perspective they also constitute a far-reaching advertising tool.

Our evaluation of online collections allowed a set of meaningful criteria to be identified against which online catalogues can be evaluated.

The negative features that users suggested supported the validity of these criteria. Both our own evaluation and the user survey indicated that an ideal online catalogue should be easy to find within the home page; simple and quick to consult; and to offer clear, expandable, and accurate information.

The research provided a snapshot of the current standing of British cultural institutions in respect of their online collections. It underlined the growing role of digital resources in research. It demonstrated the extent to which online databases are today an essential constituent of cultural institutions and the desire of museum and library professionals to embrace online and digital media. While 25 per cent of the museum survey respondents already had collections online, 47 per cent told us of plans to either extend their resources or to provide new digital catalogues in the future.

The heterogeneous and representative sample of British museums demonstrated an interesting correlation between the character and fabric of individual museums (i.e. internal policies, collections' qualities, their intended uses, contingent situations) and their virtual embodiment. Far from being mere repositories of information, websites present the virtual visitor with a flavour of what to expect from a museum visit and an insight into the institution. When designing and delivering online resources museums should consider not only the requirements of different users, but also the image they wish to convey through this window for the outside world.

## THE EVIDENCE

### 7.3 HOW USERS FOUND OUT ABOUT COLLECTIONS

The mail list user survey asked respondents what was the most likely way to find out what is in the collection, and what they would prefer.

The match between the preferred and most likely means was not close (Fig. 7.1). It was no surprise that an online catalogue was the runaway preference, with email as the backup; nor that email was the most likely route in practice. 'Word of mouth' may reflect contact between researchers at meetings and so on.

In responses to the survey of museums, email was given as the most common route, followed by telephone. However, museum staff would not necessarily know if a user had accessed an online catalogue (if the museum had one, that is). Telephone calls interrupt one's work flow and may well be perceived as more common than in fact they were – or research based users such as these may be less inclined to use the telephone than are more general enquirers.

### 7.4 EVALUATION OF COLLECTIONS LISTED ONLINE

The term 'collections listed online' could encompass both online databases and also content whether textual, visual (photographs, drawings, sketches, etc) or audio, relating to individual objects or groups of objects.

	Would prefer		Most likely	
Online catalogue	39	48%	21	25%
Email enquiry	18	22%	23	28%
Museum's published catalogue	10	12%	5	6%
Telephone enquiry	7	7%	8	10%
Word of mouth	4	5%	14	17%
Written enquiry	1	1%	7	6%
Externally published catalogue	0	0%	1	1%
Other	2	2%	4	5%
Total	81	100%	83	100%

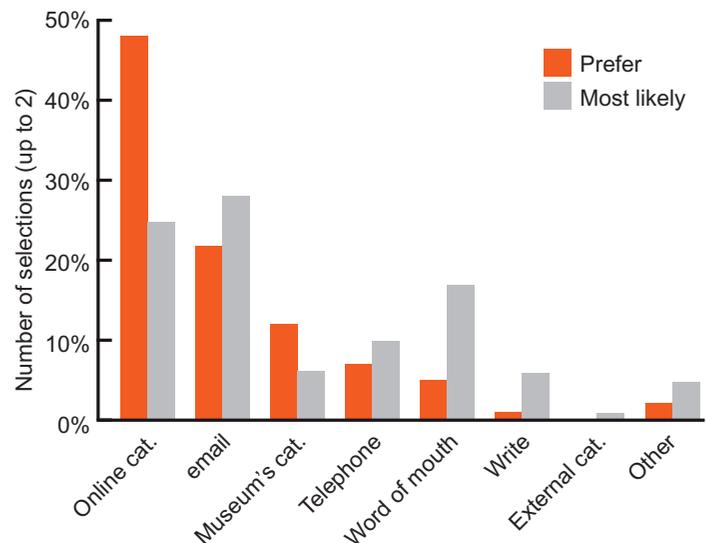


Fig. 7.1. Preferred and most likely ways to find out what is in the collections.



For museum websites without an online database a general assessment of the online resources was carried out.

### Methodology

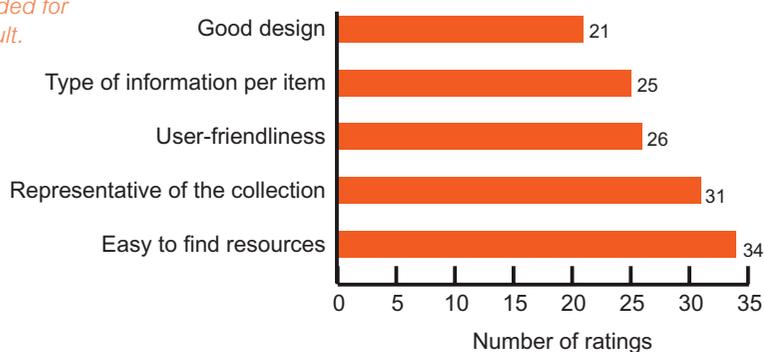
To simulate the experience of users as far as possible, a virtual search was carried out on each website aiming to find information about an object, or group of objects within the collections. Reactions, behaviours, questions, reflections, and usability issues which emerged during the task were carefully observed and annotated, using evaluation methods such as scenario-planning and heuristic evaluation.<sup>84,85,86,87</sup> Heuristic rule-based evaluation was compared to the experiences of users.

Five criteria were used to assess the websites:

- How easy it was to find the catalogue/online resources within the museum home page
- The overall design of the catalogue/resources (colour, text size, layout)
- User friendliness: e.g. how easy it was to navigate within the catalogue/resources; how easy it was to find an item without prior knowledge of the collections' content; if the catalogue offered lists to select from, rather than only a free text search box
- The extent and type of information provided for individual items (e.g. catalogue number, photographs, text, references to publications, etc.)
- Whether the catalogue offered a representative overview of the collections.

To compare the individual websites, a point was assigned for each positive result against one of the five criteria (Fig. 7.2).

Fig. 7.2. Results of evaluating the survey museums' websites. A point was awarded for each positive result.



Seven websites were assigned the highest score (five points). These offered easy access to the catalogue, a visually pleasing and effective design, user-friendly search methods, a comprehensive amount of visual and textual information for individual items, and a wide-ranging understanding of the collections.

### Resources easy to find

Of the 43 museums with at least a minimum level of online resources 34 offered easy access to the information directly from the home page, usually under a 'collections' link. In contrast, direct access to the resources is obstructed when databases are embedded in secondary pages or given a specific name (e.g. BMAGIC, the catalogue for the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery).

### Design requirements

The design specifications were met in 21 museum websites. Four characteristics of underperforming websites were identified: they did not provide textual and visual information logically and sequentially; they tended to cram too much text into the page; they used design idioms inappropriately (colour scheme, text size, layout of images, pagination); or the material they delivered was under designed or over designed. Under designed websites have very basic, dated, unimaginative design. Local authority museum websites in particular can be characterised by a tired, unexciting, and standardised design, although they may provide basic catalogue-like information about the collections. Conversely, over designed websites may use eye-catching colours to the detriment of legibility, cram pages with too many search-boxes and links, and generally fail to deliver a clear understanding of the conceptual and physical layout of the website.

### User-friendliness

User-friendly websites are easy to navigate and allow users without previous knowledge of the collections and/or familiarity with the online resources to find the desired information. Of the websites that were evaluated, 26 had these qualities. Especially helpful to the searcher are predefined lists and object fields in addition to free-text search boxes.

<sup>84</sup> Norman, D A, 1988. *The Psychology of Everyday Things*. Basic Books, 2002.

<sup>85</sup> Carroll, J., Carroll, J., and Rosson, M. B., 2002. *Usability Engineering: Scenario-based Development of Human-Computer Interaction*. Elsevier, p. viii

<sup>86</sup> Neilsen, J. 1994. 'Heuristic evaluation'. In J. Neilsen and R.L. Mack (eds.), *Usability inspection methods*. John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>87</sup> Blandford, A. et al 2008. Pret a rapporter: evaluating digital libraries alone and in context. *Information processing and management*, 44, 4-21. 7.

Predetermined object lists with no free text search box can be equally detrimental to the overall usability of the catalogue since the discerning user – the one who knows exactly the object they want to search for – is forced to go through a number of pages before reaching the relevant data.

### Type of information per item

An appropriate amount and range of information for individual items was offered on 25 websites. Satisfactory examples provide a description of the object with photograph, cross-references to other related and similar objects, extensive background information and, occasionally, audio information. At the other end of the scale are websites that offer basic catalogue-like descriptions of the items with poor quality photographs, or no visual reference at all.

### Level of representation of the collections

An important aspect of online resources is their ability to represent the totality of the museum's collections. This quality does not directly depend on the percentage of digitised items but on the choice of resources in relation to the entire collections. Of the websites investigated 31 offered a flavour of their overall collections, irrespective of the extent of the digital information provided.

At least one museum gave an excellent overview of the extent of its collections with only one per cent of their resources online, while another did not achieve the same result despite a complete virtual catalogue.

## 7.5 USER RESEARCH

As with access to physical collections, we wished to assess what users thought about online museum collections information. The respondents to the mail list survey were invited to complete a further short online questionnaire: a small sample of 17 responses was received.

### Types of online catalogues used by the respondents

As expected, respondents cited experiences of a wide variety of collections (Table 7.2), with a prevalence of humanity based subjects, arts, and archives.

### Most helpful features of online catalogues

**Survey Q: The positives: What makes you think, this is going to work well? What features do you find most helpful in online catalogues?**

The seventeen respondents offered 37 examples of helpful features. Four main categories were: data type (thirteen responses), usability (ten responses), provision of quality photographs (seven responses), and accessibility (seven responses).

The responses suggest that, predictably, people use online databases for research when they are physically removed from the museums and archives and/or to save time. Speed was emphasized in seven responses: the value of instant access to data, promptness of information retrieval, and fast download of images. It appears that if the expectation of time-saving is not fulfilled, the virtual searcher will probably turn elsewhere. One person, however, stressed that although digital resources allow access without physical presence, the latter is always preferable.

An exploratory browse of the 18 websites suggested by the users as examples of good practice confirmed that, with little exception, they all share up-to-date design, rich and varied data, introductory explanations, abundance of photographs, and user-friendly interfaces.

Table 7.2. Types of collection online listings used by mail list users.

Type of collection	Number of mentions by users
Archives and National archives	5
Art (drawing, sculpture), design, and history of art	5
Museums (e.g. Museum of London; Exeter Museum)	3
Primary data: manuscripts, documents, photographs	3
Archaeology	2
Egyptology	2
Glass	2
Social history	2
University collections	2
Local Records Offices and family history	2
Botanical collections and herbaria (e.g. BG-BASE)	2
University library	1
Private collections and galleries	1
Film	1
"Revolutionary players"	1
Canal historical records	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>



Overall, it seems that much still can be done to improve digital resources, particularly in terms of readiness of access and usability. One respondent was particularly disillusioned: *“Most are fairly useless; I am unable to provide any positive examples”*.

### Unhelpful features: what makes users’ hearts sink?

**Survey Q:** The negatives: What makes your heart sink? On the whole, what do you find least useful, or dislike most, about online catalogues?

Respondents gave 29 negative examples. Five categories were found: issues with the data provided, usability, access, technical drawbacks, and design. Users’ concerns were unprompted and support the validity of the criteria we employed in our evaluation of online databases.<sup>88</sup>

The type of data available for individual items is a major concern for users (Fig. 7.3). In ten instances the respondents expressed their dislike of inaccurate, incomplete, and unusable information:

*“Inconsistencies in the way data has been entered; not being able to get a feel for the actual content; when there is a ‘large picture unavailable’ sign; not having images; some [databases] lack vital information while others are really difficult to read” and “not being able to access more detail information”*.

A second cause of irritation was the poor usability of search engines (eight responses). For example, users’ hearts sink when:

*“a decent search facility is not available; when there is only one search field; [when I*

*encounter] search forms that only allow use of keyword searches and don’t return objects that you know are held; they return irrelevant results, or that cannot be used intelligently, e.g. Boolean search options, or keyword, or exact phrase”*.

Usability should be considered more carefully by museums, archives, and libraries that provide digital catalogues. In particular, *“not being able to find items without spending time tracking them”*, *“difficult to find objects”*, and *“hard to locate databases”* were recurrent complaints.

These results underline again that a useful digital experience is the product of design, data, usability and accessibility. The lack of any of these can hinder successful searches and leave users frustrated.

### Examples of user-unfriendly online catalogues

People struggle to recall anything about the websites responsible for negative experiences. Seven out of seventeen respondents could not remember (or did not want to name) any ‘bad’ online catalogues. In the words of two respondents: *“I cannot think of any off hand, but they are out there. What is interesting is that I cannot remember any of them – I guess that shows you how bad they are!”* and *“I can’t find examples [of catalogues uneasy to use] at this time. I have not bookmarked the bad ones!”*.

This is not a desirable effect in a world where competition for users’ attention and customers is high, and where eligibility for funding is measured against returned visitors and accessibility.

## 7.6 USERS RECOMMEND

### Features ranked by importance

The respondents were asked to rank the criteria that we had used in our assessment of digital resources. All the suggested criteria were considered important. Being able to effectively search for objects of interest was a first choice for the majority, thirteen users. Less important were the design of the catalogue, the provision of images in catalogue entries and the comprehensiveness of the catalogue, with one choice each.

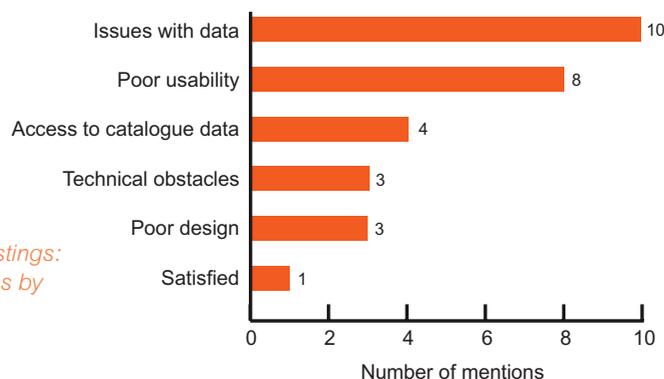


Fig. 7.3. Collections online listings: mentions of negative features by users.

<sup>88</sup> The criteria are: accessibility of resources; design; user-friendliness; type of information per item; representative of the collections.

Among users' recommendations were:

- To be explicit about incomplete coverage
- To provide a platform which enables searching to be narrowed down to required areas
- To consider target audiences when designing online resources
- To be more aware of how three dimensional objects may be used and of the material qualities of touch
- To invite virtual visitors to contribute their specialised knowledge
- To avoid fancy web-tools that require the user to install additional software; and, obviously,
- To test sites with users.



## Use Study 14 – Opening up and promoting archaeological stores to visitors

It had always been an ambition to open the stores to members of the public. Prior to 2006 very limited opening (such as a tour on National Archaeology Day) was always well received. Our store underwent huge re-organisation in 2005/6 and it became possible to invite the public in safely and to be able to show off some fantastic elements of the collection which had previously been fairly inaccessible. Funding was available to pay for a number of interpretation panels and a showcase.

We decided the best approach was to offer guided tours, including a handling session, rather than free-flow, and to allow free access. For us it is essential to plan the days we open so staff are available on the day, and we can continue to function as a working store around those dates. Visitors do have to book in advance.

We advertised through press releases, which were picked up by two regional TV channels, BBC radio, and regional and local newspapers. All came to the stores to complete reports etc. In the following week most of the tours we were offering were fully booked so we put on additional tours. The press releases were focused on particular aspects of the collection, new for each year. The 2007 press coverage was less than the previous year (no TV) and we had less take-up until we advertised through our member's magazine and a page on our web site. Following that response we will continue with all those publicity elements for 2008 as well as our national handbook.

Public knowledge of the store tours seems to be a key element to their success and we're learning from each opening and event. We are fortunate that we have quite a large number of 'free' advertising avenues open to us; this includes the local Tourist Information Centre who handle our bookings. Support from all staff, from our own team to local site staff to national senior management is also a significant factor in being able to continue to open the store.

Use study

## Use Study 15 – An off-site collections centre

The centre was set up in September 2002 to store the collections of all the museums in a city service. Pressure came from having 50 dispersed stores on various museum sites, some in a dire state, closure of one of the museums, and a push to free up main site space for education etc.. The council supplied £4.2m to build an extension and convert an office building for collections storage.

The main purpose is to store collections well and to provide access to and use of them. It achieves 26% first time museum visitors and 30-40% socio-economic C2, D & Es. Even so, its access and visitor activities do not have a high profile with the museum service management. It regularly encounters council and media attitudes: why are things locked away? Why not on display? It is felt that the Museums Association's current priority on loan and exhibitions tends to exacerbate this.

### Practical arrangements

The staff of five work as a team, with flexible roles and skills. Other resources include a public programmes manager (main site) who organises the volunteer guides; some curator visits and a day a week from one of the conservation staff. It's also used for workshops and seminars, e.g. a recent NADFAS (National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies) Ceramics Day.

Objects are fairly randomly organised within broad collections – this is more stimulating than if too strictly categorized. There are no interpretation panels though they are rolling out concise labels (500 to date). The MLA refused accreditation, giving as a reason 'Lack of 'interpretative panels' etc.! But staff have noticed people looking at e.g. china for a long time, really studying objects, rather than reading a label and moving on.

### Opening and access

- two open days a year plus Heritage Open Days
- special openings such as Lord Mayors Charity event and 'Big Picture' Arts Council.
- guided tours on request for community and specialist groups
- formal education groups including adult education
- access for anyone as far as possible on request (individual researchers)

Tours are conducted by Guide Enablers. These are about 10 people specially recruited and trained, paid per session. There is a mix of people, including post career break women, those volunteering in order to develop a museum career, ex head master, ex nurse, etc...

To start with each chose 12 objects to research; all information was then pooled. The system works well. Several of the guides started out with a fine art base, but have broadened their interests and knowledge, partly in response to what visitors are interested in.

They have learned as time goes by that tours, even general ones, can be largely self guided – visitors tell about their personal connections with objects, for families this can be similar to visits to military collections – granddad used to work in that factory etc. There is less connection with older objects.

Special interest / expert groups know a lot about the collections objects and mainly just need to be taken to them. (But they are the worst for getting their hands on objects!)

Input from curators tends to be limited – they are the point of contact for special interest groups. However, not all subjects in the collections have a curator.

Open days are all evaluated. Frequent remarks include 'it's good to see the Council taking care of our heritage / past', 'Enjoyed the opportunity to talk to people about what museums do and their wider role'. Conservation events at open days are very popular – they provide people with useful information on how to look after possessions.

Access is very popular. A common complaint at open days is that people can't visit all of the aisles – even, that they can't see the objects on the upper levels of racking. They always want to see more. Other critical comments are, 'why can't the museum display all these objects?' and 'why isn't the Centre open every day?'

### Partnerships and collaborations

These are evolving. For example, for Heritage Open Days a nearby Museum of Transport provides shuttle transport in heritage busses from the city to its two museums. A different Hub museum is considering providing a touring collections bus

### Plans and development

The collections centre staff set themselves the challenge of maximising repeat visits, so they create new aspects of the experience for each open day. They provide information boards to let visitors know how they have responded to requests and comments. For example, on the first Open Day there was too little light, and on the next open day a third of visitors brought torches! But they were not needed as the centre had introduced (very inexpensive) new runs of lights in the aisles.

In some ways the staff said that it was an advantage being off-site, as they could just implement developments they think of. The disadvantage was that it was hard to persuade curators to visit.



Fig. 8.1. Levels of engagement and access. The sizes of the circles reflect both the number of visitors/users and the number of objects that might be 'accessed'; the shade of colour, the time spent and intensity of experience.

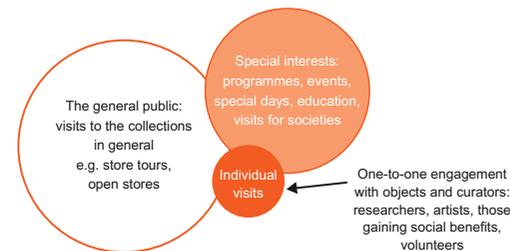


Table 8.1. Categories of open or visitable storage (after Davies 2006).

Typological displays	Visible storage	Open access storage	Resource or Study Centre
Densely displayed objects in galleries Minimal interpretation May include provision of further reference material Free access	Densely displayed objects in addition to interpreted displays May include provision of further reference material May include provision of further reference material Free access Use of drawers, unused corridors or other gallery space	Often for large/industrial objects Access usually by tours/open days Often includes access to observe or talk to staff May be attached to the museum or a separate location May combine more than one museum's collection	In addition to collections store may include internet, reading & study rooms, handling collections, exhibitions, teaching, loan boxes Access often partly free & partly by tour Can often observe or talk to staff More often in separate location to museum May combine more than one museum's collection

<sup>89</sup> Stuart Davies Associates 2006. *Opening Up the stores. A report on museums and open stores*. Stuart Davies Associates: unpublished report for the Heritage Lottery Fund.

<sup>90</sup> For example, Pes, J. 2002. Open storage special: reserve judgement. *Museum Practice* 19, 62-4.

<sup>91</sup> Wright, D. 2002. Open storage case study: National Railway Museum, York. *Museum Practice* 19, 53-5.

<sup>92</sup> Caesar, L. 2007. Store tours: accessing museums' stored collections. In S. Keene, ed. *Studies of stored collections in museums: Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, Special Volume 1, 3-19.

The evidence suggests that once the museum has set a positive management objective to increase and provide access to and use of its collections many creative ways of doing this are found, whether for individual researchers or for general public visits. This section briefly outlines some of the practicalities of providing for access to collections in manageable ways. Many inspiring examples are described in the Use Studies and the Ideas.

### 8.1 LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

In Use Study 3 the mission statement for an historic house is quoted. This cascade of use offers a frame through which to view different kinds of provision for access. It is also a good way to examine the tension between volume of users and intensity of engagement (Fig. 8.1).

- Conserved for everybody
- Visited by many
- Inspiration to some
- A pivotal experience for a significant few

### 8.2 VISITED BY MANY: GENERAL PUBLIC ACCESS

The natural first thought when considering access for the general public is open storage. Davies has categorized the different varieties of open storage (Table 8.1).<sup>89</sup>

The survey of museums showed that providing for access for people in groups was associated with more users. But do some types of public access please visitors more than others?

Typological displays and visible storage have their critics.<sup>90</sup> Visitors are confused because they feel they should be more like exhibitions; staff (and by extension researchers) find barriers to getting at objects to work on them. The author found a typologically organised visible store less than engaging (Use Study 9), although dense typological displays used as backdrops to galleries in the same museum were more impressive.

Some studies of open access storage have shown that relatively unrestricted access can be greatly enjoyed. Evaluation of the store at the National Railway Museum, York, which is simply open as part of the museum, found it to be preferred by some to the main displays.<sup>91</sup> Caesar's evaluation of the store tours provided by the Science Museum in 2005 found that visitors were delighted with the experience.<sup>92</sup>



## Use Study 16 – Making access more manageable in a university museum

The Resource Centre is a room set up for visitors to study objects and documentation relating to the museums' four collections. Previously each collection had a separate study room but this was found too resource intensive.

### Guidelines extract

The Resource Centre is a place where people visitors can gain access to the Museum's collection and paper and photographic archives.

The Resource Centre is only one of many ways in which visitors and researchers can have contact with the Museum's collection. Other appointments can be made directly through the relevant collection curator

### Booking

Appointments can be made in person at the Resource Centre Reception Desk or by phone or email. All visitors must provide a postal address, telephone number, and if possible email address so that they may be contacted at short notice. At the time of booking all visitors should specify their area of interest, including as much information as possible about the objects they require

The Museum will retain contact details of all visitors, together with a list of objects studied.

### Facilities

There are 12 research spaces available at any time these are provided with 2 power points each, an angle poise lamp and access to magnifiers. Also available will be the Museum's photographic archive, selected publications and bound copies of the Museum's Accession Registers. The Resource Centre is wireless-networked and connected to the Internet through the University's network. Currently access is limited to staff and students of the University of Manchester.

Other users of the Resource Centre may bring their own laptops but will not yet have access to the internet.

### Requesting objects

All objects and specimens in the Museum collection are available for research, study or enjoyment by any visitor, researcher and/or student.

While most objects can be brought up to the Resource Centre there are others which, due to collections care or health and safety considerations, can only be viewed under direct curatorial supervision in other areas of the Museum.

When making an appointment the visitor should specify the areas of the collection they wish to view and any specific requirements they may have. The request should be as detailed as possible and should state enough information to enable the Museum's staff to find the object. The nature of the request, details of the requestor and the accession numbers of the objects will be recorded on the Museum's collections management system. Objects will be brought to the Resource Centre on the day of the researcher's visit and returned to the appropriate store at the end of the visit. For visits of more than one day, they may, subject to appropriate collections care concerns, be kept secure overnight elsewhere in the Museum.

### Staffing

The management and operation of the Resource Centre is based within the Collection Management Team of the Museum and is directly managed by the Resource Centre Manager. All staff within Collections work in the Resource Centre on a rota basis. A copy of the rota will be available at the main Reception Desk, the Resource Centre Reception Desk and on the Museum's website.

### Rules for users/researchers

These include, among other rules, restrictions on the personal property such as bags or backpacks that can be brought in; handling objects; no food or drink; copyright and publication.

Source: Study 19

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 16

#### Addressing the staffing problem

There is a new community museum/heritage centre being developed by the University and they have requested access for research purposes to the archaeology collection. We plan to create a visible store to replace the museum in the next two years. This will be promoted by the library service and will be staffed and managed by them. The entire social history, fossil, coins and medals and fine art collections will be made accessible through this initiative while the archaeology collection will be housed in the basement.

The collections centre in Use Study 15, where visitors are requested to provide feedback on every open day and tour, reports very positive reports.

Why the difference? A diversity of objects and encounters with snippets of information at single object level, provided by labels or tour leaders, may be what engages interest. While exhibitions and displays have a narrative or theme, stores are about brief encounters, and it is possible for the experience to be almost entirely in the hands of the visitor (for example, Use Study 15). Anecdotally and subjectively, visual stimulus and variety (“something for everyone”) are important. This should be tested in properly designed research.

### 8.3 INSPIRATION FOR SOME: PROVIDING FOR SPECIAL INTERESTS

There is a plethora of well established ways to provide for – and stimulate – special interests in the collection, from lectures from staff utilising a lot of objects, inspiration days (Idea 7), ‘Try it on a Thursday’ for over 55s (Idea 17). Events like this currently often rely on a small handling collection and could be extended much further to allow people to engage with more of the collections. Some of the Ideas show how special interest groups advertise collections visits to their members.

### 8.4 PROVIDING FOR RESEARCHERS

Researchers are the most time consuming category of user, but perhaps the least challenging in terms of other resources. A number of cost effective measures were found (Table 8.2).

### 8.5 FINDING THE RESOURCES

#### Staff

Lack of staff was cited by 79 per cent of ‘more users’ museums and 64 per cent of ‘fewer users’ ones as an obstacle, and overall was the top issue preventing fuller use of collections. “Inhibiting factor is staff time. Demand is controlled by not publicising availability.” “We would prefer to offer more access but staffing is a difficulty.”

Some text replies mentioned that access had increased once a curator post had been filled,

or decreased because posts had been lost. Contact with curators is valued by researchers and can lead to good store tours or group visits but curators are a relatively small proportion of the staff of most museums. Table 8.2 lists some of the ways found to make their expertise go further. Some of the main ways include:

- **Using ICT** to convey information directly linked to objects
- **Training or briefing Explainers** or similar programme personnel. In one museum some education staff had attended a local course in archaeology in order to be able to conduct collections events
- **Engaging outside staff.** For instance, freelance tutors in specialist subjects are available almost everywhere and by paying them to deliver courses or events interesting new knowledge and perspectives on the collections could be brought in
- **Forming partnerships with external groups and institutions** and encouraging them to utilise collections in activities they themselves provide.

Replacing curators is not always a popular route: “*With a limited number of collection staff it is hoped the new Resource Centre will free up the need to supervise on a 1-1 basis. There is still some resistance to the idea of sharing responsibility within the Museum and also to allow (heaven forbid!) the public to be aware of what we have in the stores!*”. Volunteers may have limitations, too: “*wonderful volunteers but often access of the type being described here is not really what they can do.*” “*We need to attract the younger generation. [Our town] has about 9000 inhabitants but almost 300 societies as it is a very pro-active community. There is therefore a lot of competition for volunteers.*” “*This museum has no staff, only unpaid volunteer workers, who are quite difficult to entice. 90% of these volunteers are post-retirement age, among whom disease and mortality clusters can be a problem.*” Volunteers, or museum Friends, can also become over proprietorial.

The survey found no statistical association between ‘more users’ and a member of staff specifically dedicated to providing collections access, which suggests that while desirable, this is not essential. However, the Study visits found that where there was such a staff member (sometimes Renaissance funded) collections access seemed to be enhanced in quantity and quality.

Idea or Example	Users	Staffing arrangement
Idea 16	General public	A visible store that will be staffed and managed by library staff
Idea 19	General public	The museum interpreter team members were sent on a course in Roman history and thus equipped to deal with public tours of important parts of the archaeology collections
Idea 9	Social benefits	Partnerships with sectors outside museums who would largely supply the resources
Use Study 9	General public, special interests	Renaissance funded collections access staff (not specialist curators)
Use Study 15	All users	Collections management staff provide many kinds of collections access in an off-site collections centre
Use Study 15	General public	Paid Guide Enablers train themselves to conduct tours and events. Experience has shown that tours can be largely self-conducted by those attending. This requires investing staff time in selection, training and facilitation, naturally.
Use Study 2	Researchers	The museums' archival collection is housed in the local Record Office and made available to researchers on specific days.
Use Study 13	Special interests	There is a budget to pay external tutors to deliver courses, sessions, etc., using the collections.
Use Study 7	Researchers	The Registrar has equipped their office for researchers, so she can continue with her own work while they study objects.
Use Study 16	Researchers	A single study room replaced separate rooms for each of four collections. Staffed by curators on a published rota so that users may select a day when an appropriate curator will be there.
Use Study 13	Special interests; general public	A Renaissance funded collections access officer makes the practical arrangements and develops relationships with outside bodies; curators as well as for researchers and users use the Study Centres for collections work.

Table 8.2.  
Ways of staffing collections access.

## 8.6 WHAT PREVENTS ACCESS?

### Lack of space

Space was the most commonly identified problem (143 out of 232 responses) especially for providing for group visits to stores. *"Store very difficult for access, in poor condition, no space for enquirers/researchers."* *"Storage is shocking!"* This is partly a matter of efficient collections management, including control over collecting and carefully planned disposal, so that there is space for objects.

### Off-site location

Is on-site storage, or off-site storage, or a resource centre, a solution or a problem? The Examples provide illustrations of access equally well developed on-site and off-site. If collections are little used then the logical answer is to move them to a cheaper location – in which case they may be used still less. This invites questions about a viable future for collections and the ethics of using public (or even private) funding to maintain a resource so little used. Three of the responses about ways

that public access had ceased to be provided said that stores had moved off-site, one ten miles away. Another, however, said that off-site storage had moved back on-site rendering stores too overcrowded for visits.

It is obviously more difficult to provide for public contact with collections off-site, unless the location is staffed and resourced to provide access in its own right (Use Studies 12 and 15). *"Rural location is major barrier to access to reserve collections."* This latter was also mentioned in a visit to a leading museum resource centre in a rural location.

### The role of curators

Does the role of curators need to be revisited: is it to actively develop inreach services based on the collections, when proximity to stores may be an advantage, or is it to focus on exhibitions and enquiry answering, which can be done from an office, with the collections miles away? In Use Study 13 on-site study centres (rooms) provide for both – yet in Use Study 7 even though storage was on site curators were little involved with collections access.

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 17 Enjoyment

Over 55s Workshops  
 Participants: 15 (20 places)  
 Charge for session: Free  
 Costs: Freelancer, materials  
 In April and May 2007, 3 workshops were run under the heading 'Try it on a Thursday'. These workshops were aimed at over 55s. They were run during the day and in between school times. This meant that grandparents who are also carers for their grandchildren could attend. The workshops were held in the morning, when it is generally considered that people have more energy. The sessions didn't last longer than 2 hours, and were deliberately informal. Research has shown that many older people do not wish to participate in formal learning, and are not interested in gaining qualifications. Most people however, are keen to use their leisure time to learn new subjects or skills in an informal, fun way. Participants in these events regularly report that they have become increasingly alienated from [the main museum], which they feel is primarily targeted at a family audience.

### Collections management and documentation

Collections documentation was identified as one of three top obstacles in 18-20 per cent of museums. A well-organised and well-documented collection is an accessible and usable collection.<sup>93</sup> *"We currently have very limited facilities and limited documentation, although this is changing rapidly. We are launching our online catalogues later this year and expect to begin attracting many more research users & other visitors to the collection from this time on."* Increased demand was attributed by some to: *"1) Collections going online. 2) Improved access and internal housekeeping etc. 3) Bringing documentation and stores up to date and inventoried after many years' work doing this."* *"50% of our collection was catalogued thanks to HLF funding (and entirely available online). Without such a massive financial input (capital, staff time etc.) we've been unable to make the rest of the collection as easily accessible due to very limited staff time."*

### 8.7 ACCESS NO LONGER PROVIDED

Asked whether there had been ways of providing for collections access that had been discontinued, sixteen museums reported that they had given up access measures, three of them temporarily. Three no longer had the staff; in three, stores had been moved off site; in four, access had been suspended pending redevelopment that would provide for better access. This is a comparatively encouraging picture.



Photo ©Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery



Photo ©Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery



Photo ©Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

<sup>93</sup> Wallace, A. 2001. Collections management and inclusion. In: J. Dodd and R. Sandell, Including museums. Research Centre for Museums & Galleries, pp. 82-91.



- Conserved for everybody
- Visited by many
- Inspiration to some
- A pivotal experience for a significant few

*Mission statement for the National Trust property, Tyntesfield*

## 9.1 CONCLUSIONS

Museums' stored collections are a very large public resource that is costly to maintain. Some museums are making good use of their collections, but others much less so. The research found a very wide range of user numbers, up to 14,000 a year. The top 20 per cent of museums had 400 or more users a year – almost ten a week.

What makes a difference to the amount of collections use? Promoting and marketing the means of access, providing it for groups or the public as well as for individuals, and having a designated or national collection were associated with more use. Not associated were staff numbers, collection type, accreditation or registration, or even having had a collections related grant.

Unsurprising, even banal, these findings have far reaching implications. Simply, given the commitment, any museum could achieve much greater use of its collections.

The museums in the top 20 per cent demonstrate that their collections represent an opportunity to be highly creative and to use more fully a resource that is already being 'conserved for everyone'. The range of types and sizes of museums show that this is possible across the whole range.

Greater use of collections does require resources, but these need not necessarily be additional. Priorities can be re-ordered. In particular the concept of inreach can be employed. Many of the programmes and events now delivered through outreach could bring people in to make creative use of collections. Museums could be more open to the public and to their events and education staff using their collections.

Collections activities lend themselves to targeting very particular sectors and markets and thus serving many familiar (and new) museum agendas – learning, community cohesion, sense of place. Collections use and access can be used by museums to deliver services to different audience sectors, as do programmes and events.

Storing collections safely and providing exhibitions are good ways to achieve the Tyntesfield principles of Conserved for everybody and Visited by many. The many ways of using collections allow museums to achieve the further Tyntesfield principles, Inspiration to some and A pivotal experience for a significant few: the definition of excellence offered in McMaster's report for the DMCS.<sup>94</sup>

## 9.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

The results and findings suggest some very practical measures for consideration by museums, funding and strategic bodies.

- Museums should recognise that their collections are public resources and hence that they have an obligation to make them publicly available. They should heed the evidence of increasing public demand for access to them.
- Standards for accreditation should include benchmarks for collections access and use. Collections related grants should require evidence of improved access to be produced.
- Some of the museums that were making good use of their collections had appointed a collections access officer whose role it is to liaise with local groups and facilitate collections programmes and uses. While not found to be essential those that had done so found it invaluable.
- Users would like museums to publish what is in their collections, preferably online, at least at collection description level.
- To assist users, museums should publicise the processes involved in accessing or visiting collections and provide examples to give people ideas on how they could be used.

<sup>94</sup> McMaster, B. 2008. *Supporting excellence in the arts*. DCMS. p. 9.

- To encourage the use of collections, museums should advertise and market their availability, as they do other services.
- Museums should provide collections access activities as a service to other organisations that would find this useful.
- Museums should mainstream collaboration and partnership working rather than allow these to continue to be peripheral or exceptions to the rule. Many museums do do this: the challenge for the sector is to apply them enthusiastically and more comprehensively.<sup>95</sup>
- Curators should consider the focus of their role: is it on exhibitions and office based activities such as enquiry answering, or on generating and facilitating greater use of collections? This could fit with developing greater knowledge of collections.

## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 18 Social benefit

Volunteer Placements in Partnership  
Participants: 2  
With Partner Organisations  
One volunteer came to the Study Centre having spent long periods of time out of work due to depression. The volunteer has now been regularly coming in since 2004, and undertakes some important collections management work within the Archaeology Department. A second placement also worked with the Archaeology collections and was organised with the local Association for the Blind. The volunteer and his assistant went on to full time employment in administration, having developed new skills working in the Study Centre.

## 9.3 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

There has been a series of calls on museums, both local and national, to make more use of collections and respond to public wishes. In 2005 the DCMS consultation paper, *Museums and 21st Century Life*, posed questions about the uses of museum collections.<sup>96</sup> The Audit Commission wrote a detailed response, calling for museums to be more responsive to communities and less concerned with the wishes of their own professionals.<sup>97</sup> In 2008 the Local Government Association and the Museums Association published their joint report, *Unlocking local treasures*. Most recently, there has been the McMaster Report, urging cultural organisations to devote themselves to excellence, excellence not confined to the few but for the many.

*Unlocking Local Treasures*, from the LGA/MA, is aimed at helping elected members and non-specialist staff to 'make the most of the valuable assets local authorities already own'. It urges

museums to 'turn their storage problem into an opportunity', and says, 'Innovation is not reliant on the staffing and funding levels of the bigger museums'.<sup>98</sup> This research supports these statements, and shows how this is possible.

The McMaster Review, *Supporting Excellence in the Arts*, makes the case that excellence in arts and culture is for everyone.<sup>99</sup> McMaster writes that '... those that receive public subsidy have a responsibility to ensure that from every penny spent, the greatest value is extracted'.<sup>100</sup> Good practice, McMasters says, leads to excellence, and excellence is about experience.<sup>101</sup> Specifically tailored and possibly inspirational experiences based on the collections themselves can be an aspect of excellence for museums.

This research found that providing and encouraging access to collections is not an established service in museums, despite earlier policies<sup>102</sup> and a widespread impression that everyone has a right to access collections. There are no benchmarks and no performance indicators. Such conferences or training exercises as there are portray access as the exception, not the rule.

This lacuna offers an outstanding opportunity for innovation and creativity in museums. There is intense competition for leisure time and a growing number of people who are retired but active. No other type of organisation can offer engagement with collections themselves. There is an almost infinite variety of activities using collections, and users themselves can invent them too. Exhibitions will always be expected of museums but this is a chance for them to reinvent quite fundamentally the services they offer.

McMaster urges that professionals continue to extend and develop their skills throughout their careers.<sup>103</sup> One way to do this is by turning the focus to collections based services.

Local authorities fund 32 per cent of museums, and virtually all receive public funding from

<sup>95</sup> DCMS 2005. *Understanding the future: Museums and 21st century life*. Department of Culture Media and Sport.

<sup>96</sup> Audit Commission 2005. *DCMS consultation on understanding the future of museums and the 21st Century*. Response to the DCMS consultation paper, DCMS 2005. *Understanding the future: Museums and 21st century life*. Department of Culture Media and Sport. Para. 4.

<sup>97</sup> Audit Commission 2005. *DCMS consultation on understanding the future of museums and the 21st Century*. Response to the DCMS consultation paper, DCMS 2005. *Understanding the future: Museums and 21st century life*. Department of Culture Media and Sport.

<sup>98</sup> LGA and MA 2008. *Unlocking local treasure: collections management and the local authority museum*. Local Government Association/Museums Association.

<sup>99</sup> McMaster, B. 2008. *Supporting excellence in the arts*. DCMS. p. 17.

<sup>100</sup> McMaster, B. 2008. *Supporting excellence in the arts*. DCMS. p. 16.

<sup>101</sup> McMaster, B. 2008. *Supporting excellence in the arts*. DCMS. p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> DCMS 1999. *Museums for the many: Standards for museums and galleries to use when developing access policies*. Department of Culture Media and Sport.

<sup>103</sup> McMaster, B. 2008. *Supporting excellence in the arts*. DCMS. p. 15.



## The Ideas Collection

### Idea Collection 19 Addressing the staffing problem

Roman Handling Collections  
Used by: Interpreter Team  
Renaissance funding enabled two members of the Museum Interpreter Teams to complete a course in Roman history in 2006. These members of staff went on to lead three sessions for volunteers on a local archaeology project, using relevant collections. Using the skills and knowledge they had gained, the Interpreters were then able to discuss with curators ways in which to develop their own handling collections. These handling collections have since been used for several events in the Museum and Study Centre.

other bodies or as grants. So we may note the Audit Commission's response, calling for the sector to -

examine ways by which it can become more outward looking, identify the needs of the communities it serves, and develop services to meet those needs. The sector should become more public and user focused, be driven by intelligence from and about its communities, whether at the local or regional level, and design the nature, scope, impact, and purpose of its services around that intelligence.

The sector should build alliances with its communities and allow services to be shaped, influenced, and delivered in line with local people's interests and the needs of those communities, and not the preferences and aspirations of professionals.<sup>104</sup>

How are these desirable developments to come about? NESTA, in its study of innovation in low innovation sectors, examined the complexities of innovation in some public and private sectors that were notoriously resistant to changing their practices. It found that barriers to innovation vary widely according to sector: in some they are economic due to taxation regimes; in some, a lack of skilled personnel; in others, structural and cultural factors inhibit innovation, and 'the legitimate prioritisation of the delivery of critical services ... might restrict opportunities for innovation.' Political pressure may create a fear of failure that 'precludes experimentation with new approaches'.<sup>105</sup>

In museums, the pressure is for ever higher visitor numbers. It was remarked by some respondents to this research that local authority funders sometimes see collections use as an elitist service that should take second place to more populist events and exhibitions. Add to that the undoubted 'cultural conservatism of some practitioners'<sup>106</sup> when it is curating exhibitions that leads most readily to career advancement for curators and the sector's reluctance to prioritise collections uses is easily explained. Museum professionals should understand that an important new future for museums could arise from creative and inspirational engagement of people directly with the collections.

**The closing scene: Museum professionals being shown round a collection store.**

**Curator: "If someone asked to see an object, at what point would it be decided whether they could see it? Who would decide?"**

**Guide (looking puzzled): "We would just bring the object to them. Our whole philosophy is that the collections belong to the public, they are their collections, so anyone has the right to see them at any time. If the object was fragile we might take them to it in the store rather than bring it out to them. We'd like to see PhD students in the workroom studying objects side by side with an unemployed person who just wants to pass a morning looking at objects."**

Source: Study 30



<sup>104</sup> Audit Commission 2005. *DCMS consultation on understanding the future of museums and the 21st Century*. Response to the DCMS consultation paper, DCMS 2005. *Understanding the future: Museums and 21st century life*. Department of Culture Media and Sport. paras. 35-6.

<sup>105</sup> NESTA 2007. *Hidden innovation: how innovation happens in six 'low innovation' sectors*. Research report: National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, June 2007. p. 19.

<sup>106</sup> NESTA 2007. *Hidden innovation: how innovation happens in six 'low innovation' sectors*. Research report: National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, June 2007. p. 19.

## Use Study 17 – An inreach exhibition project with the local community

Local residents worked in partnership with the museum to produce an exhibition chosen entirely from the stored Science and Industry collection at the city's Museum Collections Centre. A diverse group of residents was selected by the Community Project Co-ordinator from existing local groups: Age Concern, National Trust Young Friends, sheltered housing, City College (education special needs). This project was unusual in the degree to which it was led by the choices of the local residents. The project is now also producing loan boxes for community use using a similar process.

### Varied perspectives

#### The curator

The groups were invited to visit and during tours of the stores ten likely people were identified on the grounds of showing an interest in the collections. They came up with a range of themes and the museum short-listed those for which there was sufficient material. The group chose the

final theme of communication and music, and the staff then got out about 200 items representing these themes in the widest sense. The actual choice of objects was down to the group. Most of the artefacts selected have never previously been exhibited: the choices were not those that a curator would make. Rather, they are objects that had personal resonance, interest or wow factor for the group rather than necessarily being historically significant. The group then produced the text and guided the overall interpretation of the exhibition.

#### Museum staff

There are great benefits in having a professional from special needs work. She was a bit baffled by museums to start with but in a few weeks knew her way around. They felt that since she started from a position of not knowing how museums worked, she was better able to empathize with the team members.

#### Team members

Representatives of the groups each made a short speech at the opening ceremony, and each team member was given a certificate of achievement. Clearly the involvement of the Community Project Co-ordinator had been essential and much appreciated. NT young person – had made new friends, found a big treasure trove normally secret – a shame because it's the heritage of the people of the city. Age Concern – he had a vague idea that museums had collections but was just blown away when he saw the store contents. Having been a DJ he'd chosen things to do with music recording and playing.

#### Collections and stores managers

It would have been almost impossible without a comprehensive collections database and a well-organised store. They were very enthusiastic about this project and proud of the numbers and diverse groups that were now visiting the Museum Collections Centre.

#### Chief Executive, exhibition centre

Opening speech – This was a project in which the museum handed over control to residents. It was outstanding as a chance for them to bring their own voices into the museum inspired by the collections. He is very pleased with this and also proud of the new 'career ladder' scheme, modelled on

one in New York, where people start at 16 as volunteers and progress to being paid for w/end work and eventually to jobs in the museum.

### **MLA DCF fund / Renaissance**

MLA thinks this is important because people should feel at home behind the scenes in museums. Outreach is not enough – that's where museums do the selecting and it's their choice. The difference is that here it's others bringing their voice into the museum.

### **Community Project Co-ordinator**

Qualified as a professional special needs worker, she thought the project had been very valuable. The team was very mixed – young, old, special needs etc. Did anything distinguish it from other community projects, e.g. community arts? The objects were a special thing, people related to them very strongly and often emotionally. People benefited from working in a professional way to create something valuable.

But doesn't it reach only a very few people? Yes, but there is a ripple effect, they bring their families to see it, family members tell others...

### **The challenges**

On the whole this was a remarkably smooth project but there were some challenges:

Employing a project co-ordinator from outside the sector was very successful at engaging genuinely new audiences, but it took longer than we had anticipated for her to familiarise herself with the job - which she then did brilliantly.

There was a certain amount of rivalry/jealousy between two members of one of

the groups. We were able to overcome this by hard work with both, but next time we'd ask community group leaders to advise on potential conflicts.

Practical limitations like the size and weight of objects constrained what the group would have liked - one of them chose objects that added up to a coherent story, but we couldn't fit all of these in one case due to size.

We didn't have the time or budget to implement all of the group's ideas about contextualising objects in the exhibition using music and video - I would also have liked them to be able to choose the contextual photographs for each section, but the meetings didn't fit in with the dates we needed to be ordering from picture libraries

Some people have said that there isn't enough information about the objects; only about the reasons people have chosen them. The single line above each caption with the name and date of the object is as much as you'll find in most of the rest of the heritage galleries, so we haven't taken anything away. This does however highlight the difficulties of producing information that satisfies the needs of different audiences.

The process was quite demanding of staff resources. If the sector is to deliver more engagement with new audiences it can't be done purely with existing resources.



# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1

### Collections mapping projects listed by region and date

Region	Date	Mapping exercise /comments
North East	2007	First mapping exercise for this region – prehistory collections
		Lynch, H. 2007. <i>Prehistory: who cares?</i> North East Regional Museums Hub.
North West	1996	Survey of all registered museums by North West Federation of Museums and Art Galleries, to encourage co-operation between museums. Detailed breakdown of collections in each of the 71 museum services (amounting to 145 museums) that responded.
	1997	The natural science collections of sixty institutions reported in more detail.
	1993	University museums for the north in general reviewed.
		Kenyon, J. & Davies, S. 1998. <i>The collected collections: A collections survey for the North West Federation of Museums and Art Galleries</i> , North West Federation of Museums and Galleries.
		Cleland, G., Horie, V., & Wallace, I. 1997. <i>Skeletons in the cupboard. A report on the condition of institutionally held natural science collections in the North West of England, with suggestions for their care and use</i> . North West Collections Research Unit.
		Arnold-Foster, K. 1993. <i>Held in trust: museums and collections of universities in Northern England</i> . Museums and Galleries Commission.
Yorkshire & Humberside		Yorkshire and Humberside: Reviews were carried out by collection area.
	1987	Natural science
	1992	Industrial and social history
	1997	Decorative arts
	2000	Archaeology
		YHMC 1987. <i>Register of natural science collections in Yorkshire &amp; Humberside</i> . Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council.
		Kenyon, J. 1992. <i>Collecting for the 21st century; a survey of industrial and social history collections in the museums of Yorkshire and Humberside</i> . Yorkshire and Humberside Museum Council.
		YHMC 1997. <i>Objects with visual ambition</i> . Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council.
		YHMC 2000. <i>Increasing antiquity: archaeology collections and collecting in Yorkshire and Humberside</i> . Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council.
West Midlands	Biennial from 1996	One of the few areas where some trends can be discerned.
	2000	University museums reviewed, with E. Midlands.
		WMRMC 1996. <i>First principles</i> . West Midlands Area Museums Service;
		WMRMC 1998. <i>First principles update</i> , West Midlands Area Museums Service.
		MLA West Midlands 2004. <i>Fast forward update</i> . MLA West Midlands.
		Arnold-Foster, K. & Weeks, J. 2000. <i>Totems and trifles, museums and collections of higher education institutions in the midlands</i> . West Midlands Regional Museums Council and East Midlands Museums Service.
East of England	2005	No detailed, quantitative mapping project. Qualitative review via desk-based research and interviews.
		EEMLAC 2005. <i>Collections and communities. A strategy for the East of England</i> . East of England Museums Libraries and Archives Council.

Region	Date	Mapping exercise /comments
South West	1994	Social history and industrial collections
	1999 2001 on	Complete mapping project (91 per cent). Results online since 2001 – continue to be updated.
	1996	Museum archive collections in Devon and Cornwall
	1999	University and college collections
		<p>SWMC 1999. <i>Mapping project</i>. South West Museums Council;</p> <p>SWMC 2000. <i>Museum mapping. A survey of museums and collections in the south west of England</i>. South West Museums Council.</p> <p>AMCSW 1994. A survey of social history and industrial collections. Area Museum Council for the South West Info Sheet, Vol. 7.</p> <p>Leary, E. 1996. <i>Hidden assets: Museums and their archive collections. Collections in Devon and Cornwall</i>. Museums and Galleries Commission.</p> <p>Arnold-Foster, K. &amp; Weeks, J. 1999. <i>Minerals and magic lanterns. The university and college collections of the South West</i>. South West Museums Council.</p>
South	2001	Southern Museums Agency, amalgamated in 2001 with South East Museums.
	1999	Higher education collections - independent study, primarily qualitative, included issues of access: 'it would be impossible to characterise the scope of these collections as anything but diverse and eclectic'.
		Arnold-Foster, K. 1999. <i>Beyond the ark: museums and collections of higher-education institutions in southern England</i> . South East Museums Service, London. 24.
South East	2000	Mapping exercise – data from 138 of 167 institutions approached.
	2001	Higher education collections - independent study, similar to that for the South.
		<p>SEMS 2000. <i>Museums of the South East 2000. A strategy for our region</i>. South Eastern Museums Service.</p> <p>Arnold-Foster, K. &amp; Weeks, J. 2001. A review of museums and collections of higher education institutions in the Eastern Region and the South East Region of the South Eastern Museums Service. South Eastern Museums Service.</p>
London	2005	Study of collections and collection policy across the local authority archives, museums and libraries. Not quantitative, but posed useful questions on how users find out what is in collections and on barriers to collection accessibility.
		<p>MLA London 2005. <i>Collections and collection policy in London's local authority archives, museums and local studies libraries</i>. MLA London.</p> <p>MLA London 2006. <i>Knowledge and inspiration. A strategy for archive, library and museum collections in London</i>. MLA London.</p>
SCOTLAND	2002	Comprehensive audit - detailed profile of museums and collections (170 organisations covering 435 sites represented; over 12 million objects).
	2002	Other surveys of parts of the sector have included university collections
		<p>SMC 2002. <i>A collective focus. Scotland's national audit, summary report</i>. Scottish Museums Council. 13, 1.</p> <p>Drysdale, L. 1990. <i>A world of learning: university collections in Scotland</i>. Scottish Museums Council.</p>
WALES	2007	Mapping exercise – amount and types of collections and extent of overcrowding in stores.
	2002	Survey of Welsh university collections.
		<p>CyMal 2007. <i>Spotlight on museums</i>. Welsh Assembly Government.</p> <p>Council of Museums in Wales 2002. <i>Dining amongst the bones: a survey of museum collections in Welsh universities</i>. Council of the Museums in Wales.</p>

## APPENDIX 2

### Frequency and size of collections: what is known

Collection	Scotland	Wales	South England	South-east England	South-west England	West Midlands	North-west England	Totals	Current survey sample
	N = 170		N = 137	N = 138	N = 226	N = 193	N = 145		N = 181
Most frequent									
Costume & textiles	128	55	66	84	115	101	46	<b>595</b>	
Photography, photographs	134	53		91	112	101	46	<b>537</b>	97
Social history		62	62	85	117	109	61	<b>496</b>	89
Fine art			61			95	54	<b>210</b>	
Archives	146		62					<b>208</b>	97
Least frequent									
World cultures/ ethnography	48		16	26	31	21	18	<b>160</b>	
Natural history/ biology		20	15	31	41	29		<b>136</b>	16
Oral history		20		32	50			<b>102</b>	
Health	76							<b>76</b>	
Maritime		18	15			16	17	<b>66</b>	
History of science	66							<b>66</b>	13
Geology		23	23					<b>46</b>	
Egyptology							18	<b>18</b>	26
Science							7	<b>7</b>	
Decorative arts							46	<b>46</b>	

Frequency of collections as reported in various mapping exercises.

Type of collection	Number of objects (millions)
Biology/Natural Science	92.76
Archaeology	23.16
Archives	9.39
Photography	8.86
Geology	7.19
Social history	5.23
Fine art	4.03
Transport	3.87
Science / industry	2.86
Decorative / applied arts	2.22
Numismatics	2.16
Costume / textiles	2.05
Ethnography	1.99
Agriculture	1.45
Military	1.09
Personalia	0.50
Maritime	0.44
Medicine	0.35
Music	0.30
Oral history	0.28
Arms + armour	0.17
<b>Total</b>	<b>170.35</b>



Appendix 2.2. Collection sizes according to the DOMUS report. Carter, et al. 1999. *Museum focus. Facts and figures on museums in the UK. Issue 2, MGC. p. 24*

**APPENDIX 3****Responses to the question, "If there is a collection ...what per cent of it is in store?"**

	0%	1-5%	6-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-94%	95-100%	Total collections
Photographs	1	6	12	8	2	9	59	97
Social history	2	5	8	17	15	21	21	89
Archives	2	26	56					84
Costume + textiles		9	8	4	3	14	36	74
Archaeology	3	9	4	6	8	11	33	74
Fine art	4	10	9	5	10	14	19	71
Coins	4	5	2	5		8	35	59
Library	2	11	10	1	1	3	30	58
Art on paper		10	5	3		9	28	55
Decorative arts	1	3	6	5	12	11	11	49
Military		6	8	4	7	5	13	43
Natural history	2	3		4	2	10	21	42
Geology	1	1	2	4	3	5	25	41
Oral history		7					32	39
Industrial	4	1	7	4	6	4	13	39
Sculpture	4	6	3	3	4	4	11	35
Personalalia		5	1	5	2	8	12	33
Agriculture	1	7	3	5	2	5	9	32
Ethnography		1	1	4	3	3	19	31
Transport	4	3	3	7	4	3	6	30
Film		6	1				20	27
Hist. of science	2	2	4	1	1	4	12	26
Music	1	2		3	2	4	4	16
Maritime		1		4	2	2	4	13

**APPENDIX 4****Numbers of museum respondents' selections of collections against various uses and users. Ordered by frequency of selection in each category.**

<b>Research</b>			
Academic researchers	Unaffiliated and other researchers	Commercial (dealers, developers)	
34 archaeology 24 art, all 24 archives 18 history (various) 17 photos 15 costume + textiles 6 natural history 4 ethnography	22 art, all 23 photos 23 history (various) 20 archives 17 costume + textiles 15 archaeology 5 natural history 1 ethnography	15 art, all 5 archives 4 photos 4 history (various) 3 archaeology 1 costume + textiles 1 natural history 0 ethnography	
<b>Education</b>			
Schools (only stored collections)	Universities, colleges	Informal adult education	
22 history (various) 9 art, all 8 archaeology 3 archives 3 natural history 2 costume	16 art, all 15 archaeology 11 history (various) 10 costume 8 photos 6 archives 3 natural history 3 ethnography	25 history (various) 19 art, all 9 archaeology 6 natural history 5 archives 5 costume 1 ethnography 1 photos	
<b>Memory, identity</b>			
Individual, family history	Public occasions		
32 photos 27 history (various) 19 archives 7 art, all 1 archaeology 1 costume 0 natural history 0 ethnography	16 history (various) 12 photos 7 art, all 3 archaeology 0 natural history 7 archives 0 costume 0 ethnography		
<b>Creativity</b>			
Artists	Authors	Crafts, design	Film, TV
25 art, all 10 history (various) 9 natural history 6 archaeology 4 archives 3 costume + textiles 2 photos 2 ethnography	11 art, all 10 history (various) 10 archives 2 natural history 1 costume + textiles 1 archaeology 1 ethnography 1 photos	14 art, all 4 archives 3 history (various) 3 costume + textiles 2 natural history 2 ethnography 1 photos 1 archaeology	17 history (various) 11 art, all 9 archaeology 4 costume + textiles 3 archives 2 natural history 2 ethnography 1 photos
<b>Enjoyment</b>			
Special interest groups	Local people, volunteers	Friends of the museum	
24 history (various) 13 art, all 12 archaeology 7 costume + textiles 6 photos 5 archives 2 ethnography	0 natural history 18 history (various) 12 art, all 10 photos 10 archives 8 archaeology 5 costume + textiles 1 ethnography 0 natural history	10 art, all 10 history (various) 4 archives 2 archaeology 2 photos 1 costume + textiles 1 natural history 0 ethnography	

Note: 'History (various)' includes occurrences of social, local, aural, science + medicine. Art, all includes fine art, art on paper, sculpture.



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**2008**