

Local authority museums and the modernizing government agenda in England

*Ian Lawley**

The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent

Introduction

In the United Kingdom local authority museums are undergoing significant change in terms of organization, function and status, largely in response to a changing external environment. Although little in the way of government policy has been directed specifically at museums, social, economic and cultural policies have had a significant impact on the way in which museums operate and interact with their local communities. The primacy of the market ideology during the 1980s and 1990s brought a shift in focus in museums towards income generation, customer orientation and increased 'efficiency'. Museums were told to adopt 'business-like' management techniques, and strategic planning and performance management became tools of the museum director's trade. Financial constraints and the need to adapt to a system of plural funding required museums to develop new strategies and new forms of management.

The environment in which local authority museums now operate is complex, uncertain and diverse. Museums have found that conflicting internal and external influences conspire against effective strategic management. Success in meeting strategic goals often depends on acquiring external funding and meeting the differing and sometimes conflicting criteria of different funding agencies. Museum managers have had to learn new vocabularies in order to frame opportunistic and often hybrid funding bids to a variety of agencies. At the same time, local government reform and other legislative changes are bringing a new set of influences to bear on local authority museums and art galleries, sometimes in subtle ways, but in many ways far more directly than has usually been the case with cultural policy.

Of course, museums are not homogeneous. They serve a large number of different constituencies and their internal cultures remain diverse, however strong the rhetoric of mission statements, business planning and performance management, tensions and competing values remain between managers, curators, educators and front-of-house staff. The conflicting priorities of local government can mean that a museum manager is expected to adopt a commercial approach towards income generation while at the same time contributing to social inclusion and lifelong learning initiatives. A major skill of museum management is the ability to constantly reconcile differing values, functions and organizational goals, while attempting to satisfy the varied needs of diverse stakeholders.

This paper will examine ways in which local authority museums are adapting to the changing political, economic, social and cultural environment. It will concentrate on the implications for museum services of the 'Modernizing Government' agenda, particularly local authority restructuring, Best Value and social inclusion.

Local Authority Museums

The local authority sector is the most significant provider of museums in the UK. Of 1,811 Registered museums, 40% (716) are operated by local councils. These include countywide services, major urban museums and galleries and a variety of smaller, district authority museums. Unlike the National Museums, which are administered by trustees and have charitable status, these museums are owned and directly run by local authorities. Many local authorities also provide grant aid and other forms of support to smaller, independent museums in their areas.

Local authority museums have a long history. Many have their origins in collections given to local communities by societies or individuals in the nineteenth century and housed

in municipal museums built as an expression of civic pride under powers established by Act of Parliament in 1845. Subsequent legislation, particularly the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act and the 1972 Local Government Act, extended the powers of local authorities to provide museums. However, museums are not and never have been a statutory service. Consequently, their provision is not reflected in the formula that determines the level of revenue support for local authorities from central government. At the same time, as Nobuko Kawashima has pointed out, local museums have generally developed in isolation, 'which often results in the pluralistic yet fragmented and patchy nature of the service provision in Britain as a whole' (Kawashima 1997:148).

It is difficult to obtain an accurate indication of total expenditure by local authorities on museums. The former Museum and Galleries Commission's DoMUS database shows that in 1999 net expenditure by 360 museums on core museum services amounted to £116 million, but the total figure for the sector must be considerably higher. The net expenditure of local authorities on museums in 1996/7 was £137 million (Domus 1999: 165). Even allowing for the impact of 'efficiency savings' on revenue budgets during the intervening years, it is likely that current spending exceeds £150 million. Inconsistencies in accounting systems and the fact that many museum services are part of much larger local authority departments make it difficult to disaggregate the whole. At the same time, there is no consistent pattern of provision. Expenditure on museums by local authorities ranges from over £20 to less than £1 per inhabitant. It is similarly difficult to arrive at an accurate visitor figure for the sector as a whole. A MORI survey conducted in 1999 for the Museums and Galleries Commission indicates that there are around 90 to 100 million visits to museums each year (Museums and Galleries Commission 1999). Stuart Davies (*By Popular Demand*, 1994) suggests that the true figure may be around 110 million visits per year. The 22 largest local authority services attract some 12 million visitors annually. However, 'there is a lack of consistent and meaningful data, which hinders trend analysis and denies the sector of much needed information' (Davies 1994).

The introduction of the Standard Spending Assessment and the imposition of spending limits ('capping') on local authorities have had a significant impact on discretionary services such as museums and galleries. Few local authority museums have escaped 'standstill' revenue budgets (a reduction in real terms) or year-on-year reductions. 75 out of 92 local authority museums contacted by the Group for Museum Directors in October 2000 reported that they had experienced either decreased or 'standstill' revenue funding during the 2000/2001 financial year. Where there had been increased revenue funding, this had generally been achieved as a result of a new capital development coming on stream. Many museum managers reported that they were being asked to prepare further 'savings' for the next financial year. Staffing levels had also fallen, in some cases dramatically (Group for Museum Directors 2000)¹. Stuart Davies suggests that this trend is due at least partially to the political perception that museums do not have a short-term importance.

'Few would deny their long-term value to society and the necessity of their long term existence. But most of them are very dependent on public funding and in the short-term world of politics and social priorities they are not seen to be very important. Consequently, they struggle to have their long-term existence guaranteed by adequate funding now. These are weaknesses which do not usually lead to the immediate closing of museums and art galleries. However, they do lead to a slow reduction or withdrawal of many of the services which attract visitors and reduce capital investment in the sector' (Davies 1994:81-82).

With the evolution of accountancy-led local government politics, and the concurrent requirement for greater 'accountability', it was inevitable that museum provision should come under greater scrutiny. The Audit Commission report, *The Road To Wigan Pier* (1991), reminded local authorities that they 'need first to be clear about why they are supporting museums, to set objectives for them and then to devise a business or development plan for the service... Services provided should be targeted at chosen customers'. During the 1990s, museum managers acquired the vocabulary of *Management by Objectives and Change*

Management, and business plans became as much a part of museum management as collections management policies. Traditional sectoral organizations such as the Social History Curators Group were augmented by such newcomers as the Museums Marketing Group. At the same time, changing government and local authority priorities have required structural changes, which have impacted on the organization and delivery of museum services.

Organizational Structures

The organizational structures of local authority museums have been subject to almost constant change since the 1960s. This has affected their internal status within local authorities and their access to the policy-making process, as Nobuko Kawashima observes:

'A typical pattern in the 1960s for large museums was the formation of a separate department, with the director as Chief Officer reporting to a discrete committee in the council. Since the local government reorganisation of the mid-1970s, many of the museums departments have been merged into larger units, such as a Leisure department. Thus the status of the museum director has often been lowered from Chief Officer to Assistant director, which has effectively distanced museums from the decision-making table. The current reorganisation of local government has been reinforcing this trend... the view that museums have lost out in the bureaucracy is generally strong' (Kawashima 1997: 20).

This trend seems to have accelerated in the late 1990s, partly as a result of local government reorganization, particularly the creation of unitary local authorities, and partly as a consequence of the drive to cut costs. There is a movement towards fewer, larger departments within local authorities, and museum services find themselves located within a bewildering variety of configurations. These range from Environmental Services through Lifelong Learning to Community Information Services. Further reorganization is generally anticipated. 75% of respondents in the Group for Museum Directors survey expected their services to be part of a restructure within two years. In many cases museum services have not even retained divisional status, but have become sections within a broader category, such as 'Cultural Services' or 'Heritage Services'. As a consequence, the senior museum officer post within many authorities is at third tier or lower. It is likely to be described as a 'service head' or 'museum manager' rather than 'director'. In only one local authority out of the 92 covered by the Group for Museum Directors survey was the head of the museum service a chief officer.

The general drive to cut costs has also led many local authorities to look at alternative forms of governance for their museums. Indeed, the last conservative government actively encouraged local authorities to consider transferring their museums to charitable trusts. While only a small number of councils have opted to put their museums out to trust, a significant number have considered or are considering this option. Anecdotal evidence suggests that museums are generally still seen by local councillors as a source of civic pride and that trust status does not find much political favour.²

Political Structures

Changes to the political structures of local authorities are also having an impact on museum services. Museums, like other council services, have usually been governed by a committee of elected members. The government's 'modernizing agenda' for Local Government involves replacing the traditional committee structure with a cabinet model or with directly elected executive mayors, according to the wishes of communities as expressed through consultation or a local referendum. These proposals were outlined in the *Local Government (Organisation and Standards) Bill*, published in March 1999. Where the cabinet system is adopted, decisions will no longer be made by committees but by individual executive cabinet members. Traditional service committees will be replaced by 'scrutiny panels', which will in theory hold the executive to account. The government argues that these changes will give 'strong, accountable and efficient leadership to local communities' but doubts have been raised

about the practical implications for the governance of museums.

'Under the existing committee system, elected politicians have a guardianship role for the heritage, as well as providing checks and balances against the decisions made by staff. It is hard to see how executive members would retain that sense of ownership'.³

Many local authorities have already adopted the cabinet model in advance of the legislation coming into force. While it is too early to assess the impact of these changes on museum services, anecdotal evidence suggests that, at least in some authorities, there is a feeling among staff that there is less contact with elected members. Cabinet member responsibilities seem to be quite broad, with a variety of services brought together under one portfolio. At the same time, it appears that many backbench councillors feel disenfranchised by the move to a cabinet system and that there is a sense of diminished accountability.

Local Government Act 1999

Although little in the way of government policy has been directed specifically at museum provision, the impact on local government as a whole has profound implications for those services. The New Labour government's proposals for the modernization of local government, in particular, will influence the future pattern of provision. These proposals were set out in a White Paper in July 1998, and formed the basis of the Local Government Act which was given the Royal Assent a year later. This document commits local authorities to develop long-term, forward looking policies; to consult the communities they serve in order to deliver services which meet real need and do not merely reflect the wishes of service providers; to deliver efficient services to high standards; to make full use of information technology in delivering those services; and 'to value public service, not denigrate it'. The White Paper also 'recognizes the special status of local councils as directly elected bodies and the community leadership responsibilities that flow from it'.⁴

Central to the delivery of this vision for local government is the new duty of 'Best Value' for local authorities. This is defined as:

'The continuous search by a local authority to improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of its services and its activities for its community and other service users. The achievement of maximum added quality at minimum, zero or reduced cost'.⁵

Although originally conceived of as an alternative to the highly unpopular Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) regime, which applied to some council services, the duty to achieve best value applies to all services, including museums. Under the Act, local authorities are required to publish Best Value Performance Plans which provide 'a clear practical expression of an authority's performance in delivering local services and its proposals to improve' (WP para 7.31). Each plan will set out a programme for Best Value reviews of council services, outlining measurable targets for the years ahead, beginning with 2000/2001. Every local authority will have to complete a fundamental review of each of its services within a five year period.

Best Value Reviews

According to the White Paper, the purpose of best value reviews is to ensure that continuous improvements to all services are made' (para 7.18). The methodology set out involves assessment of a service area against four criteria - 'the four Cs', Challenge, Compare, Consult and Compete.

In practice, a Best Value review is designed to:

- **Challenge** why and how a particular service is being provided
- **Compare** that service with those provided elsewhere
- **Consult** local taxpayers, service users, partners and the business community about the way the service is delivered
- Embrace fair **Competition** to ensure that the service is delivered in the most efficient and effective way

The implications of this process for discretionary services such as museums and galleries may be far reaching. Museums will be placed under much greater scrutiny than has been customary and they will have to justify themselves in the context of wider local government priorities and strategies. As Mark O'Neill, Head of Museums and Galleries for Glasgow City Council, points out:

'Light will be shone on things that we do less well. There are a lot of people to convince of our benefits for education and social work'

Best Value reviews must also look beyond the boundaries of the local authority itself. To Mark Taylor, Director of the Museums Association, it is clear that Best Value has implications for independent museums as well as those provided directly by local councils.

'The best value approach is not just about what the local authority provides, but what is available to the public. If there is an independent museum doing the job, you may not need a local authority one. So it is about independent museums too' (Museums Journal 1999: 43).

As no local authority is actually required to operate museums, there are some fears within the museum community that Best Value Reviews will be used as an excuse to jettison some services. As one head of service remarked,

'The political agenda may bring serious problems for museums if Best Value is ruthlessly applied. Politics has short-term agendas. Museums have long-term agendas'.⁶

Ipswich, a small local authority, spent more than £1m a year on its core museum service. This was benchmarked against Canterbury, Exeter, Gloucester, Lancaster and Northampton, and the costs of the service found to be much higher than the average.

The Chair of the Leisure Services Committee, Sheila Baguley, commented:

'We realised that we had a very expensive service. This was an ideal opportunity to have a good look at it.'

The council concluded that too much time and too many resources were spent on storage and collection care. They agreed to consider de-accessioning some of their collections. It was also decided to hold fewer exhibitions, although greater emphasis was to be placed on customer facilities — 'We definitely need more coffee shops as they are important in getting people in'. A staff restructure also took place, with the curator taking early retirement, six posts cut, and greater reliance on volunteers. Adrian Perry, Chair of the Friends of Ipswich Museum, complained:

'The Council have thought of it as a cost-saving exercise rather than what the service is really about' (*Museums Journal* 1999:43)⁷

It is already apparent that many local authorities expect service reviews to yield up across the board percentage reductions in revenue costs. Many of the museum managers contacted by the Group for Museum Directors in October 2000 expressed anxieties about the possible impact of this.

'There's a fundamental problem in trying to reconcile Best Value with "death by a thousand cuts". Further cuts will impair our ability to achieve performance

targets drastically. We rely on staff enthusiasm and goodwill to do a lot on a very little. If Best Value fails to deliver and creates negative feelings, it could jeopardise the goodwill and commitment of staff.'

'Best Value is fundamentally flawed, with an assumption of year on year "efficiency savings", meaningless performance indicators, and inconsistency in data capture. Discretionary services will be worst hit. There's also a lack of "joined-up thinking". Social inclusion work is labour intensive, with very little obvious immediate return'.

There is also concern that the Best Value process is overly bureaucratic and diverts time and resources away from actual service delivery. This view was summarized by one head of service, who commented;

'There is a danger that Best Value, and other initiatives such as Investors in People, will eat up time and energy that should actually be spent in creating and delivering first class museum services'.⁸

However, there is a widespread acceptance across the sector that Best Value is here to stay and many museum managers seem willing to embrace the process as an opportunity to reposition their services within their local authority. This view is echoed by the Museums Association's Mark Taylor:

'Best Value will almost certainly move museums into the local authority mainstream. It could be a big opportunity for museum staff if they are good advocates and believe in their service'.⁹

60% of respondents in the Group for Museum Directors survey believed that their services would improve as a result of Best Value. In one authority, inured to progressively depleting resources, the process has provided fresh hope.

'Through Best Value, for the first time, there has been external recognition of the value of the museum service and the serious level of under-funding'.

In Glasgow, where 100 posts in the museum service were lost between 1996 and 1999, a Best Value review seems set to reverse a pattern of disinvestment. Three new senior management posts have been created and a further 21 posts will be established as a result of the review. However, these posts will be funded by savings across the Culture and Leisure Services Department, including the loss of four senior management posts.¹⁰

Performance Indicators

The arrival of Best Value has exposed the general lack of consistent and meaningful data collection and analysis within the sector. The development and use of externally recognized performance indicators is a crucial element of Best Value but there has been little, until recently, in the way of formal guidance or external evaluation of museum services. Although the requirement for performance measurements was one of the recommendations of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1991), it has proved extremely difficult to establish meaningful indicators for the museum sector. The Audit Commission has for the first time set national performance indicators for museums for the financial year 1999/2000, but these are purely quantitative measures.

- The number of museums operated by or supported by a local authority
- The number of those museums that are registered under the MGC Registration Scheme
- The number of visits/usages to museums per 1000 head of population
- The number of those visits that were in person
- The cost per visit/usage

Best Value clearly requires something more robust than this and in 1999 the Audit Commission set up a consultative group in order to produce a set of measures for museums and galleries, which will be used by Best Value inspection teams. This group comprised representatives of local authority, independent and other museums, professional organizations and stakeholder groups. Its brief was to agree recommendations which would help shape the inspection methodology and produce a regime 'which is robust, yet sufficiently flexible to take account of 'what works'; one which challenges poor performance yet celebrates good practice'.

This group was asked to determine what constitutes a successful museum and gallery service and what constitutes a failing service. Its conclusions were that a successful service has clear policies, good access, high quality collections, user services and people management, leadership, accountability, sustainability and long-termism; a poor service is distinguished by low use, low stakeholder support, poor collections management, low service standards, a 'reality mismatch' and is inward-looking. Draft standards, outlining Inspector expectations, were issued in April 2000. Best Value Inspectors will be looking for evidence not only that a service adopts professional best practice and performs well against critical success factors, but that it 'adopts government and national initiatives'. These are specified as Department of Culture, Media and Sport priorities, a Local Cultural Strategy, 'a modernizing Information and Communications Technology agenda that includes museum services', lifelong learning, social inclusion, the regional Development Agency agenda and compliance with legislation (such as the Disability Discrimination Act).¹¹

Benchmarking

Accurate and relevant information is essential if museums are to justify themselves within the Best Value framework. As there is no standard pattern to museum provision, there is a danger that comparisons made simply on the basis of the size of local authorities may be highly misleading. 'League tables' based solely on expenditure may miss crucial differences in the nature and constituencies of particular museums. Conscious of the need to compare like with like, there has been a boom in museum benchmarking clubs during the past year or so. The Group for Large Local Authority Museums (GLLAM) is a network of 22 local authority funded museum services based in the UK's largest centres of population. These services are responsible for over 120 museums and galleries and have an annual revenue spend of around £70m. The group has been set up with two main objectives ; to act as an advocate for the interests of the large urban museum services and to facilitate effective benchmarking among its members. According to its 'manifesto':

'GLLAM provides a framework for benchmarking so that we may learn from each other, and so that we are able to promote our immensely valuable work in areas such as combating social exclusion, and in economic regeneration. We will share best practice across the sector, and share expertise to maximum advantage.'¹²

The group has already completed a financial benchmarking exercise, along with a capital needs analysis, has commissioned a major study of museums and social inclusion, and is now developing more qualitative forms of benchmarking. These will be essential in order to provide meaningful comparative information for undertaking fundamental service reviews. Other benchmarking groups have been formed, some seeking comparison in terms of the size of museums involved, others in terms of the nature of their collections (e.g. The Roman Museums Group). A wider organizational survey, which was commissioned by the Cultural Heritage National Training Organisation (CHNTO), sought to assess performance across the whole museum sector — national, local authority, university, MOD, independent, voluntary and private sector museums. 158 local government organizations were included in this survey, which found that they performed well in terms of staff knowledge, forward planning and financial controls. There were wide variations in performance in two of the benchmarks — management controls and opportunities for enjoyment and learning - while many scored poorly when they came to 'measuring user satisfaction' (CHNTO 1990). A number of regional

'mapping' exercises have also been undertaken, most notably by the West Midlands Regional Museums Council, which has published a series of qualitative range statements for museums in its area in its forward plan *Fast Forward* (West Midlands Regional Museum Council 2000).

'Agents of Social Change'?

The New Labour government has given a high strategic priority to the need to tackle social exclusion. This is defined by the government's Social Exclusion Unit as 'a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown'. Local authorities, working in partnership with other strategic agencies, are seen as key agents in achieving this objective, particularly through neighbourhood renewal initiatives. The government is particularly keen to promote 'joined-up working' between different council services, bodies such as health trusts and the police, voluntary sector organizations and business in order to develop an integrated approach towards social inclusion.

In May 2000, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport issued specific policy guidance for museums, galleries and archives, highlighting their role in helping to promote social inclusion. This document recommends that:

- social inclusion must be a policy objective for publicly-run museums, galleries and archives
- museums should seek to achieve the widest possible access to their collections and activities
- museums should make full use of ICT to make their collections more accessible
- museums should consult people who are at risk of social exclusion about their needs and aspirations
- museums should consider how they can further develop their role as agents of social change (DCMS 2000a).

Launching the policy, the Arts Minister Alan Howarth said that museums and galleries could play their part in promoting social inclusion by 'acting in bold and imaginative ways':

'They must develop services which meet the needs of their local communities, and involve those directly affected at all stages of the process. There is much more that can be done, particularly by museums, galleries and archives acting in partnership with other learning organisations, local authorities and agencies, and the voluntary sector in order to create real improvements in society and in people's lives' (DCMS 2000b).

Many practitioners would argue that museums have been playing an active part in promoting social inclusion for a considerable time — although they may not necessarily have described their activities in exactly that way. A study published by the Group for Large Local Authority Museums highlights the variety of community-based projects that have been undertaken by local authority museums across the country and suggests that museums are making a significant contribution to the renewal of deprived areas. According to David Fleming, Director of Tyne and Wear Museums, the case studies provided in the report show how far museums have already moved from reflecting a society which is 'largely white, middle class, male, imperialist, straight and dead'. Museums are working with young offenders, people with learning difficulties, members of ethnic minority groups, unemployed young people, teenage mothers and elderly people in sheltered accommodation, mental health patients, people with disabilities and people with literacy problems, among others. However, many of these projects are short-term, are not evaluated effectively, and are not sustainable. The report suggests that further development in this area is hindered by a lack of understanding by local authorities and central government alike of how museums work.

'Social inclusion work in museums is difficult to pin down and is not always recognised because of the diversity of language used to discuss it ; the range of names for committees, projects and initiatives ; and a lack of a wider policy framework in the local authority and the museums' (GLLAM 2000).

Consequently, suggests the report, museums are missing out on the regeneration funding that their work merits. David Fleming argues that, through a lack of wider recognition, museums are often overlooked when regeneration partnerships are being put together. This is compounded by a failure to match the social inclusion rhetoric with specifically targeted resources.

'A major problem is that there is no proper funding in the sector. If the government wants us to be part of its strategy to tackle social exclusion in culture, we need sustainable funding to build social inclusion work into the core functioning and missions of local authority museums'.¹³

Mastering Contradictions

While museums have always been subject to the influence of changes in public policy and shifts in local government expenditure, the effects of the current 'modernizing government agenda' are far more visible. A variety of influences have come into play, all of which impact on the role and organization of local authority museums. These include devolution for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales,¹⁴ the creation of new regional bodies, such as Regional Development Agencies and Regional Cultural Consortia, the requirement for local Cultural Strategies and Community Plans, the government's ICT strategy (set out in 'Our Information Age' and exemplified in the establishment of the National Grid for Learning), and the establishment of Re:source, the new Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries.¹⁵ The priorities of funding agencies are another major determinant. Alongside the Heritage Lottery Fund, Arts Lottery and Single Regeneration budgets, have appeared new funding streams such as the New Opportunities Fund and the EU Telematic Programme, as well as DCMS programmes specifically earmarked for museums, including 'challenge funds' for Education, ICT and 'Designated' collections. Increasingly, museums, like other local government services, are expected to forge new working partnerships with other agencies and organizations. With the creation of Re:source, comes the expectation that museums, archives and libraries will work more closely together and develop common standards.

Although some of these influences may be indirect, it is also clear that the impact of much government policy on local authorities as a whole and museums in particular is now quite specific. Although the government claims to be decentralizing, the effects of its policies across the country as a whole are consistent. As the context for local government as a whole is changing, so inevitably the pattern of museum provision will change. Patterns of employment are already changing, with many museums employing part-time, temporary and externally funded staff. In many cases this is a pragmatic attempt to fill gaps in staffing structures created by revenue constraints and to take advantage of the 'bidding culture' to access new funding and partnership opportunities. It also accelerates the shift away from the traditional staffing template, imitative of the national museums, with its emphasis on hierarchies of specialist expertise. Lifelong learning and social inclusion activities require new and specific skills. Museums now need staff who know how to use collections rather than those who merely know *about* collections. As the social role of museums is redefined some curators may feel threatened and marginalized — in some cases, indeed, their jobs may disappear -and it is possible that tensions between different groups of staff may intensify, at least in the short term. It will become more important than ever for museum managers to cope with conflicting values and competing priorities. Museums are becoming increasingly complex organizations, with diverse functions and contradictory objectives. That may be their strength. Nobuko Kawashima suggests that the concept of 'paradox' may be helpful.

'Organisations with paradoxes will be, if they are dealt with appropriately, more effective and successful than those without. Thus, mastering contradictions is what is needed in today's management for museums. Museums need to

know best how to foster, deploy and marshal people's creativity to make the most of their organisational capacity and work for the benefit of society. This must be done, while they deliver services on time, keep to tight budgets, and meet regulations and statutory requirements' (Kawashima 1997: 153).

If local authority museums are to survive in this changing environment, they will need to demonstrate that they do actually deliver more than just visitor numbers. They will need to test themselves against broader, qualitative standards and make clear their contribution to wider strategic objectives. They must become more visible and articulate their wider societal role. Above all, they must be proactive, they must participate and be seen to do so, develop new and active partnerships and become indispensable to the bigger picture.

Postscript

A number of significant developments have taken place within the museum sector since the original delivery of this paper in 2000. A new Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has been appointed, the post of Arts Minister has twice changed hands, and *Re:source* (the recently created Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries) has seen two Chief Executives come and go. Free admission to national museums and galleries has been introduced (a source of confusion to many visitors who assumed from the spin and hype accompanying the announcement that this applied to *all* the nation's museums). The first year of free admission saw a 62% rise in overall visitor numbers to the nationals (although doubts have been cast on the accuracy of these figures). Research by MORI suggests that a significant proportion of this increase can be attributed to more frequent visiting by traditional museum audiences rather than the development of new audiences. Best Value reviews have continued to make an impact on local authority museum services. A number have become independent trusts, notably the Bowes Museum (at Barnard Castle in County Durham) and York, which has been guaranteed funding by the city council for the first ten years of trust operation. Some have been restructured, some have seen significant funding reductions, and a few have closed. Museums with collections identified as being of pre-eminent importance under the Museum Designation Scheme have been able to make improvements to the quality of their services with the aid of the Designation Challenge Fund, the initial phase of which provided £15 million over 3 years. This was a major step forward for these museums as it formally acknowledged the importance to the nation of their collections and gave credence to the notion of 'a distributed national collection'. Potentially the most far reaching development, however, was the publication of the *Re:source* report, *Renaissance in the Regions*, which sets out a vision for the creation of a new framework for museum provision.

The *Renaissance* report was produced by a task force set up by *Re:source* in January 2001 to undertake a review of museums and galleries in the English regions, at the request of Chris Smith, then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Its brief was to examine ways in which museums might play a fuller role in education, learning, access, social inclusion, and the modernization of public services, and to establish a strategic and operational framework for regional museums, based on a philosophy of co-operation and mutual dependency. The report takes a radical look at what is needed in order to capitalize on the potential of museums to deliver innovative and sustainable public services, especially in education and learning. It identifies a number of key problems, including inconsistent museum provision across the country, sectoral fragmentation, poorly articulated aims and objectives, a failure to address government policy objectives in a consistent and sustainable way, decisions based on expediency rather than strategy, and an inefficient and ineffective use of resources. The report recommends a major redefinition of the way in which museums work together, at the heart of which is a substantial strengthening of the key regional museums.

A new framework for museums in the regions is set out, based on the following principles –

- An integrated system
- Identified leadership for the museums community in each region
- Defined roles for each element within the framework

The key radical change is the creation of a network of 'regional hubs' in each of the nine English regions. Each hub consists of one key museum and gallery service and a number of partners, and they have been selected on the following criteria: status, (including registered status and having *designated* collections); location (taking catchment area into account), infrastructure (size of collections, physical capacity, levels of expertise); and external recognition of standards of good practice. The hubs are expected to work in partnership with other elements of the institutional framework which is proposed, including the single regional agencies, other museums with *designated* collections, university museums and the national museums and galleries. Regional hubs will also be expected to work with universities, schools, learning and skills councils and with other DCMS sectors such as performing and visual arts, built heritage and tourism. The scheme envisages the leading regional museums becoming not only centres of excellence but also leaders of their regional museum communities.

For these proposals to work, significant additional resources would be needed from the DCMS. The authors of the Renaissance report state that the total sum required to meet its objectives and recommendations is £267.2m. In the event, the funds allocated to Resource for 2003/4, 2004/5 and 2005/6 by the DCMS in order to implement the Renaissance proposals fell well short of this at £70m. Resource has decided that the best strategy for delivering the Renaissance vision in the short term is to adopt a phased approach and select a small number of 'Pathfinder Hubs' to receive priority funding during Phase 1. These are the North-East, the West Midlands and the South-West. All Hubs will receive support for *Renaissance* objectives and initiatives over the next three years, but the Pathfinder Hubs will bear the responsibility for delivering results that demonstrate the value of government investment earlier than the others. It is a heavy responsibility.

Notes

¹ Group for Museum Directors (GfMD), *Museums and the New Local Government Agenda Survey*, October 2000. One large urban museum service estimated that it had made £462,000 savings during the period 1995 -2000. Among 22 larger services the average fall in staff numbers during that period was 15%. In one case, it was 55%. Another service had lost 60% of its curatorial staff.

² 60% of museum services were considering or had considered trust status, mostly in advance of Best Value. Only 5 had decided to pursue trust status. (GfMD questionnaire, October 2000).

³ Local Government (Organisation and Standards) Bill, published for consultation in *Local Leadership, Local Choice*, HMSO; Barbara Woroncow, Director of Yorkshire and Humberside Area Museums Council, quoted in Council power cut?, *Museums Journal*, July 1999, 6

⁴ HMSO, *Modern Local Government -In Touch with the People*, 1998
DETR, Letter to Unitary Authority Chief Executives, 9 April 1999

⁵ Local Government (Best Value and Capping) Act, 1999

⁶ GfMD survey, October 2000

⁷ Quoted in *Good, Better, Best*, *Museums Journal*, August 1999, 43

⁸ GfMD survey, October 2000

⁹ *Museums Journal*, August 1999

¹⁰ *Museums Journal*, October 2000: 11

¹¹ Audit Commission, Museum and Galleries Draft Standards (second draft), April 2000

¹² GLLAM launch, 28 September 1999

¹³ Quoted in *Regeneration and Renewal*, 27 October 2000: 7

¹⁴ The impact of devolution in Scotland may have quite specific and localized effects on museum provision. This is likely to be an area which will require detailed research and monitoring.

¹⁵ It seems likely that *Re:source*, the new Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, will have a much more direct influence on the performance of local authority museums than its predecessor, the Museums and Galleries Commission. *Re:source* has published a manifesto, and is currently developing research, stewardship and education strategies, together with a sector-wide standards agenda.

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* **Ian Lawley** read history at Cambridge University and has worked in the cultural sector for the past twenty years. He has experience of both independent and local government museum services and is currently Head of Museums for Stoke-on-Trent City Council. A former Chair of the Social History Curators Group and of the Group for Museum Directors, he is currently a member of the West Midlands Regional Museum Hub Executive. He is also convenor of the Designated Collections Group and is active in the Group for Large Local Authority Museums (GLLAM).