

# Sustainability and museums

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The Museums Association (MA) has issued this discussion paper to encourage people to think about museums and sustainability. Please read the paper, discuss it with colleagues, come to one of our discussion workshops, or organise your own discussion. For more information visit **[www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability](http://www.museumsassociation.org/sustainability)**, where you can find more information and also a short introductory version of this discussion paper.

Please send your comments by 1 September 2008 to **[sustainability@museumsassociation.org](mailto:sustainability@museumsassociation.org)** or to Sustainability Consultation, Museums Association, 24 Calvin Street, London E1 6NW



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# Introduction: serving the future

Sustainability is, at its most basic, concerned with the needs of the future. The generally accepted definition says that sustainability means 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'<sup>1</sup>

Museums similarly consider the future as well as the present. As the MA Code of Ethics states, museums 'enhance the quality of life of everyone, both today and in the future'. They balance the interests of different generations: 'As well as a responsibility to provide access to current and future generations, there is a duty to respect the contributions of past generations, particularly benefactors, communities of origin and creators of the objects which museums now safeguard.'<sup>2</sup> Museums devote considerable resources to honouring the legacy of collections, information and knowledge contributed by people in the past and passing it on to future generations.

Sustainability is usually considered under three headings. The most familiar of these is environmental sustainability. But it is about much more than meeting the challenges of climate change; there is also economic sustainability and social sustainability. Sustainability concerns the long-term role of museums and their relationships with communities, as well as the future of the planet. 'Sustainability is [connected to] education, the economy, business, travel, leisure and our communities. Getting the balance right is vital to secure a stable future. . . A massive cultural shift is required in every community, in every school, every workplace and every home.'<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly, few museums are yet thinking explicitly about sustainability. Over four years ago Museums Journal observed: 'Everyone is talking about sustainability. Except museums.'<sup>4</sup> In 2006 Museum Practice concluded that relatively few museums in the UK can claim to be taking environmental sustainability seriously.<sup>5</sup> Internationally, 'most conventional museums are not engaged in sustainable development work. . . despite potential benefits that might flow to their institutions and local communities.'<sup>6</sup>

Museums have a lot to consider. They typically occupy energy-hungry buildings and have expanding collections, which they aim to keep in tightly-controlled environmental conditions. They often totally destroy old exhibitions and displays and replace them with new ones, with little reuse or recycling. Quality of service and 'excellence' sometimes seem less important than counting the number of visitors. Tourists, especially international tourists, are regarded as desirable visitors, in spite of the fact that tourism often involves extensive, energy-consuming travel. More locally, museums often launch short-term projects to build relationships with new audience groups, without a clear view of how the relationships will continue once the project funding ends.

Long-term thinking is essential to sustainability, yet few museums plan more than a few years ahead (apart from major capital projects). Some traditional sources of funding are being eroded. Many museums are overstretched as they are expected to achieve more and more on flat, or declining, funding.



## Is any of this sustainable?

The MA believes that concepts of sustainability have the potential to help museums improve their service to society, to make decisions about collections management, to secure long-term financial stability – and, of course, to serve future generations appropriately.

As well as the ethical case, there is a business case. Sustainability offers great opportunities for museums. It brings new ways of interpreting collections and reaching audiences, it offers new ways of thinking about old problems such as collections care, financial stability and relationships with local communities. It brings better use of all resources, improved accountability and social responsibility and opportunities for excellence, innovation and creativity. It gives a chance to provide community leadership and is increasingly important to central and local government, and other funders.

This discussion document is part of a new programme of work to help museums consider their sustainability, overseen by the MA Ethics Committee. We hope you find the ideas here stimulating and that you will give us your views. They will help to shape our thinking and future work in this area.

There are questions throughout this document, and for ease of reference they are repeated at the end. Please send your responses and comments by 1 September 2008 to [sustainability@museumsassociation.org](mailto:sustainability@museumsassociation.org) or to Sustainability Consultation, Museums Association, 24 Calvin Street, London E1 6NW

We are open to a full range of possibilities, but it is likely that we will publish a full report in 2009 and start work on an action plan.

**Q1 Do you agree that museums need to think about sustainability? Are there important aspects of it that we have missed?**

**Q2 What are the main difficulties your museum faces in becoming more sustainable?**

**Q3 How can the MA and other bodies working on behalf of the sector support change?**

Economic, environmental and social, the three overarching aspects of sustainability, are discussed next. Then some more museum-specific implications are considered: notably collections management and museums' potential role in raising public awareness of sustainability.

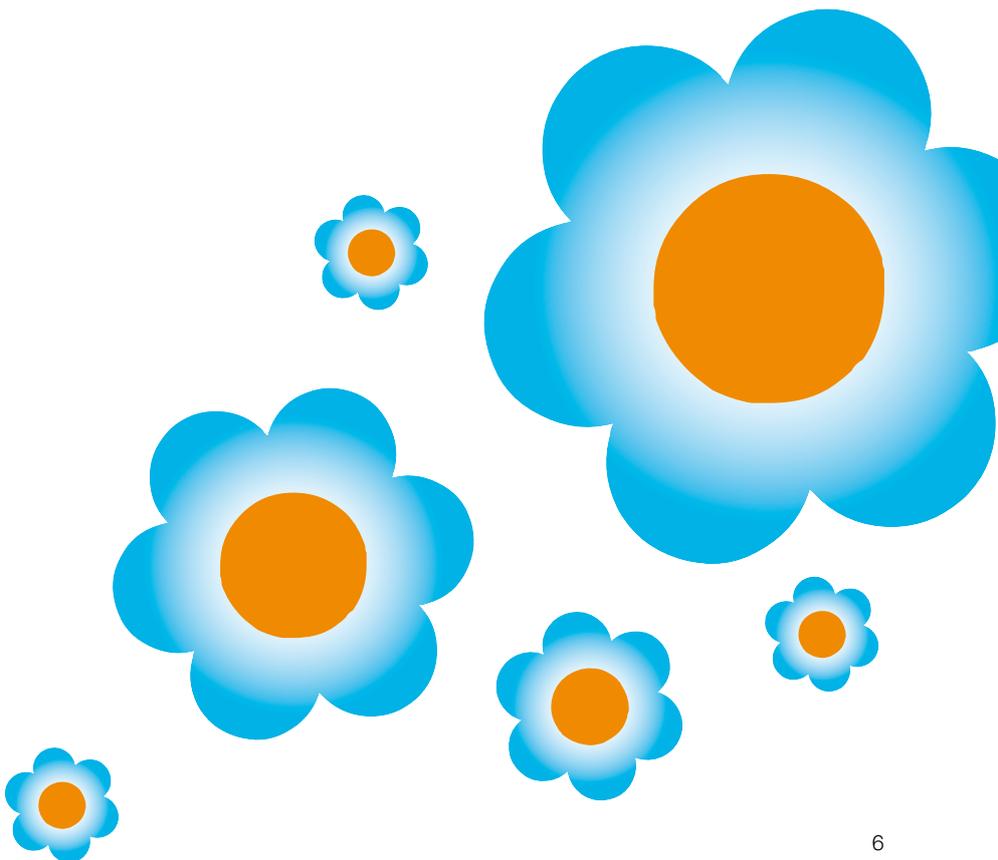


# 1 Draft sustainability principles for museums

## To flourish sustainably, museums:

- 1 Value and protect natural and cultural environments and are sensitive to the impact of the museum and its visitors on them.
- 2 Strive for excellence, building deep long-term relationships with a range of audiences.
- 3 Acknowledge the legacy contributed by previous generations and pass on a better legacy of collections, information and knowledge to the next generation.
- 4 Manage collections well, so that they will be a valued asset for future generations, not a burden.
- 5 Make the best use of energy and other natural resources and minimise waste, setting targets and monitoring progress towards them.
- 6 Consider the potential for demonstrating and encouraging sustainable development.
- 7 Contribute responsibly to the social, cultural and economic vitality of the local area and wider world.
- 8 Develop staff, offer satisfying and rewarding employment and learn from their experience and that of others.
- 9 Respond to changing political, social, environmental and economic contexts and have a clear long-term purpose that reflects society's expectations of museums.
- 10 Plan long-term, take full account of sustainable development in all their activities and policies and work within available resources.
- 11 Join with other museums, and other organisations, in partnerships and mergers, where it is the best way of meeting their purpose in the long term.

**Q4** What changes would you suggest to these draft principles for sustainable museums? Which are the most important?



## 2 Economic sustainability: taking the long view

If an organisation's finances collapse, it will be unable to serve present and future generations. Museum closures can lead to dispersal, or complete loss, of collections, expertise, knowledge and information, as well as termination of services to current audiences. Forced closures are fortunately rare; museums have proved to be adaptable and resilient.

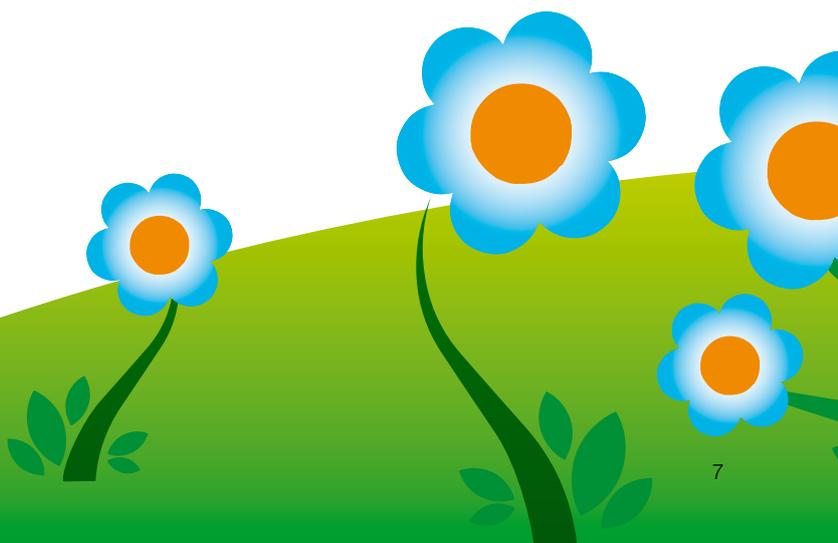
However, many museums are now overstretched and financially weak and therefore vulnerable to decline. Future funding can be uncertain. While some national museums benefit from three-year funding settlements, local-authority museums routinely have to devote great energy to resisting proposed cuts – and sometimes are cut, occasionally at very short notice. Local authority support for independent museums appears to be in decline. The funding system for university museums in England is changing unpredictably. The diversion of lottery funding to the Olympics has greatly reduced the investment available from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) until 2012 and we cannot assume that funding will ever return to the levels museums enjoyed in the early years of the lottery.

Many museums are diversifying their sources of income to avoid over-reliance on a single source of public funding. There is growing belief in the potential of private philanthropy to support cultural organisations, complementing public and charitable funding, sponsorship and earned income. Some national museums attract around half of their funding from non-government sources, some independent museums aim to operate as social enterprises,<sup>7</sup> and some local-authority museums are administered by charitable trusts that find it easier to diversify their income and can agree funding from their parent local authority several years in advance.<sup>8</sup>

'The arts sector in the UK is over-extended and undercapitalised, with cultural organisations trying to do more things than they can possibly do well, with both human and financial resources too thinly spread. Additional resources... are generally more likely to result in further under-funded expansion... than in doing core things better... The scale of activity seems destined always to outstrip the funding that can sustain it'.<sup>9</sup>

Museums have to work within the resources available to them. The sustainable answer may be to do less, but do it better. Uncertainty about funding leads museums to think short-term, whereas sustainability requires a long-term approach. 'It is time to move ourselves away from short-term obsessional behaviour around money and on to a longer-term vision around purpose.'<sup>10</sup> Museums need to be clear about their purpose and ensure that their most important activities are sustained. 'By restricting activities to "core business" operating costs can be greatly reduced... Certain specialist museums might do well to consider being open on an appointment-only basis or one day a week rather than chasing increased visitor numbers to cover high operating costs.'<sup>11</sup>

It may now be that 'in their present form most museums are unsustainable. The museum market is oversaturated, operating costs are high... productivity in such a labour-intensive activity cannot be enhanced by infusions of technology – it takes the same number of curators to change an exhibit as it did 50 years ago.'<sup>12</sup> In fact it probably takes more people. In addition to a curator, redisplaying an object might also need input from a conservator, a technician and a documentation officer or registrar. Perhaps we have made some aspects of museum work too complex?



Sustainability has been described as 'efficiency with a conscience'<sup>13</sup> and a key aspect of sustainable operation is to use the limited resources that are available efficiently in order to achieve the maximum possible impact. However, false efficiencies (such as cuts in funding on the basis of hypothetical 'efficiency savings') can weaken organisations, making them less sustainable.

In the longer term there may be less funding available for museums, not more. Public expenditure may be under increasing pressure, as taxation struggles to meet rising pension and healthcare costs, with an ageing population. Museums' income from visitors may decline as competition increases in the leisure market and transport costs increase. Changing patterns of tourism could mean fewer overseas visitors (although this may be offset by more visitors from the UK if there is a trend back towards holidays at home).

Museums may need to face up to difficult questions about who might pay for the services they provide, and even to think seriously about what sort of museum sector might be funded from a smaller pot of money.

Economic sustainability might sometimes be best achieved by working in close partnerships with other museums, or other types of organisation, to share resources. 'Financial strains on the arts sector should be addressed from the point of view of the sector as a whole, rather than on an exclusively organisation-by-organisation basis.'<sup>14</sup> From some points of view the autonomy of individual museums, largely free to determine their own priorities, is a great strength of the UK museum sector. However, it can also be seen as leading to fragmentation, duplication of effort and unnecessary competition, reducing the possibilities for coordinated activity, procurement and advocacy and so militating against the sustainability of the sector.

It may be helpful to look beyond the survival of a particular museum to see whether its services, including use and preservation of collections, might be better provided to society in different ways, or by merger with a different organisation. 'Surely some museums should be allowed to swallow others, and still others become extinct?.'<sup>15</sup>

Museums are usually seen as permanent; perhaps some should plan to be temporary and be designed to exist for a few years, or a single generation.

**Q5 Do you have examples of museums doing less, better?**

**Q6 How might better coordination, partnerships – and perhaps mergers – between museums make the sector more economically sustainable?**



### 3 Environmental sustainability: going green

'Caring about the environment is a natural extension of museums' primary role of stewardship of their collections.'<sup>16</sup> It would be perverse to preserve evidence of the natural world and human society without regard to the protection of the wider environment. Museums cannot claim to be serving the best interests of future generations if they have negative impacts on the environment that will make it harder for our descendants to live securely on the planet, let alone to enjoy museum collections.

However, there is a potential conflict between the way we approach the internal museum environment and the health of the global environment. Many museums have extremely energy-intensive approaches to caring for their collections; air conditioning is still often wrongly seen as a gold standard. While this can be beneficial for some collections, and may make things more comfortable for visitors, it is not so justifiable in terms of its wider environmental impact. Climate change is the most urgent aspect of sustainability and the most immediate way to address climate change is to reduce energy consumption.

Museums need to learn how to maintain conditions for collection preservation without excessive dependence on the use of energy. The answer is to primarily regulate heat and humidity by controlling natural ventilation and improve the insulation of museum buildings. Museums face the challenge of how to disentangle from medium- to long-term commitments to air-conditioned museum environments - something even large museums can ill-afford economically and something that may not even be necessary for the majority of collections.<sup>17</sup>

It might be helpful to review collection-care standards and the way that they are interpreted and applied by lenders, funders and support organisations such as the government indemnity scheme. Flexible loan agreements and more appropriate standards could have social, environmental and economic benefits as more objects could be made available to a wider range of people, using less energy and at lower cost. These benefits might outweigh any potential increased deterioration in the condition of the objects.

Museums are already facing pressure to improve their energy efficiency. Public buildings will soon be required to display a fridge-style energy rating, demonstrating how energy efficient they are.<sup>18</sup> This is likely to be followed by more coercive measures. Reducing energy use is not only good for the environment; it saves money that can be used for other things. (Reducing energy use by improving and better managing the building is generally better and cheaper than installing wind turbines or solar panels to generate more energy.) All museums should take control of their energy use.<sup>19</sup> Staff understanding of energy consumption is an essential first step in improved facilities management. However, some museums do not yet know what their energy consumption is because their fuel bills are paid by a parent institution such as a university or local authority.



The Natural History Museum's (NHM's) current carbon dioxide emissions are below the levels in 2000; over the next three years the museum aims to reduce these emissions by 5 per cent a year. The costs of new energy-saving technology at the NHM's Wandsworth store were recouped by savings in just 16 months. The NHM is working with other museums and organisations in South Kensington, which together aim to reduce their carbon dioxide emissions by 7-10 per cent by 2010. The V&A has a target of reducing its energy consumption by 25 per cent over five years.<sup>20</sup> Between 2000 and 2006 the National Maritime Museum reduced its use of gas by 15 per cent and use of electricity by 12 per cent. It plans to reduce energy consumption by a further 5 per cent in 2006-8.<sup>21</sup> How much is your museum going to save?

In addition to energy, museums will want to reduce waste<sup>22</sup> and consider the environmental impact of other resources that they consume, such as exhibition and building materials, water and paper<sup>23</sup>. There are several sources of 'green' office supplies and some manufacturers of office furniture are working to minimise their environmental impact. Museums could work together on their procurement and use their joint buying power to persuade manufacturers of museum-specific products and contractors to be more environmentally friendly. The HLF has published guidance for applicants on minimising their impact on the environment. These guidelines will encourage museums to consider their environmental impact more fully.

Visiting museums often means energy-consuming car journeys, or air travel by international tourists. Reducing the energy used by audiences will be easier for some museums than others. Some will be able to promote green transport alternatives, or aim for more visits by local people and fewer tourists. However, there will always be potential audiences based far away. And museum visits have many positive benefits, so the fact that they have an environmental impact obviously does not mean that we should not be making any at all.

New models of service delivery might lessen the need for expensive museum buildings and reduce energy consumption. Museums may offer alternatives to visiting, such as taking collections out to users and other forms of outreach, although more objects on the move will mean more use of energy to transport them.

Virtual museums already provide some museum services, such as learning and access to information and knowledge about collections. However, they are less able to provide other important social and educational museum benefits, such as direct access to collections and civic spaces at the heart of the public realm. Online services may have less environmental impact than museum buildings, but energy is still needed – and the computer industry itself is hardly a model of sustainability being fraught with conspicuous consumption and unnecessary obsolescence and creating hard-to-recycle hazardous waste.

The museum sector needs a much greater understanding of the energy costs of its work. We simply do not know whether more or less energy is needed to get visitors to museum buildings or to take museum services to visitors.

**Q7 Do you think that collection-care, loan and government-indemnity standards should be reviewed or used more flexibly, with a view to reducing energy use?**

**Q8 How can your museum reduce its energy use? Do you monitor your energy use? What difficulties do you anticipate in reducing energy use?**

**Q9 How might you design or adapt museum buildings and exhibitions to reduce your environmental impact?**

**Q10 How might your museum change what it does to reduce the environmental impact made by you and your visitors?**

## 4 Social sustainability: local and global communities

As part of the public realm museums have always contributed to society by, for example, helping to create a sense of place. In recent years, UK museums have strengthened their relationships with society. Their work is audience-focused, they are accountable and most consult widely, considering the concerns of local people alongside those of experts. They engage with many communities and actively develop new audiences.

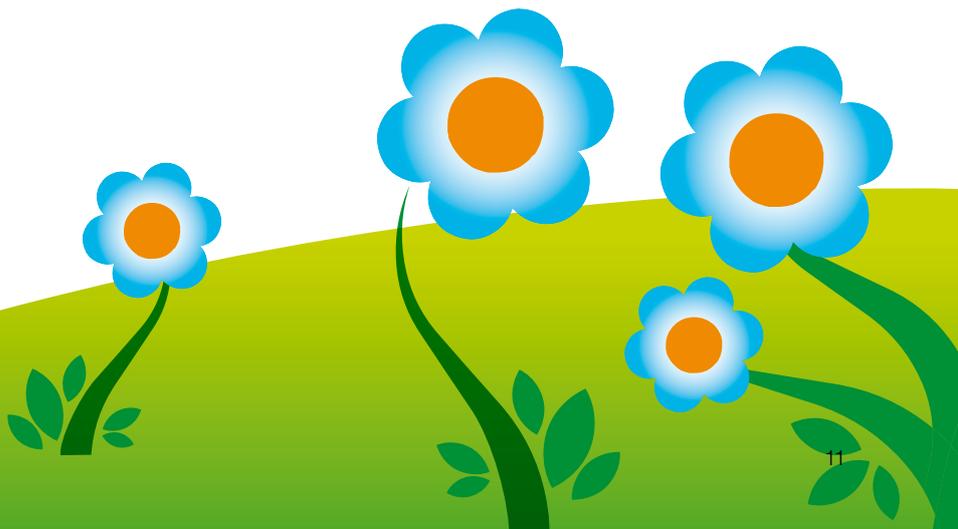
Museums can increase their social sustainability by deepening and diversifying these relationships, aiming to reflect the diversity of society in all that they do. Museums need to have a long-term attitude to audiences, for example by valuing repeat visitors. In particular, they need to find ways to maintain relationships with new audiences beyond the limits of a short-term audience-development project. Funders need to pay careful attention to this, but it is perhaps also a matter of attitude on the part of the museum. Museums can become more responsive to people's interests and needs if they take fuller account of market research: 'audience research that is fully integrated into the programme-producing cycles of museums remains rare.'<sup>24</sup>

Some people believe that operation as a tourist-orientated visitor attraction is at the expense of a deeper social role. 'Museums must return to being learning hubs, not destination attractions. Only then will they be sustainable.'<sup>25</sup> 'One of the keys to long-term sustainability is museums becoming more socially responsible.'<sup>26</sup> Social responsibility has been described as organisations' efforts 'to improve society and undo harm where harm has been done'.<sup>27</sup>

To some commentators, museums have 'a tremendous opportunity to play a vital, new role as cultural facilitator... but not without fundamental changes in their mandates, activities and organisational structures.' In this view, 'more progressive' museums could have an ambition to 'rebuild depleted stocks of human and social capital through interactive, community-led activities' that will strengthen society. In this way some museums have great potential to contribute to creating sustainable communities, 'places in which people want to live, now and in the future [that] embody the principles of sustainable development at the local level'<sup>28</sup> and include 'a strong local culture and other shared community activities'.<sup>29</sup>

Other museums 'that continue to operate mainly as object-centred tourist attractions may find it difficult to be involved in sustainability work... Their best option might be to highlight historical and contemporary examples of socio-economic and ecological sustainability'.<sup>30</sup> This is discussed further in section six.

Consideration of social sustainability has led to renewed questioning of the role of museums: 'What is the objective of the museum? Is it to promote culture, a particular scientific discipline, its curators' scholarship or tastes, another way for cultural consumption or for leisure? Or is it one of the most effective educational instruments for community development, which draws its strength and life from the community, uses the cultural and social capital of the community, opens windows on the outside world, and listens to its real problems?'<sup>31</sup>



Museums can strengthen their relationships with society by becoming socially responsible enterprises that have a positive impact on the lives of people who work for them, who provide services to them and who grow or manufacture the things they consume or sell on (the goods in their shops, the food in their cafes). By their behaviour museums could become demonstration models for a sustainable society.

Museums can consider their place in the local economy as purchasers of goods and services, perhaps seeing benefit in using local suppliers. Some museums focus on local distinctiveness in the shop and cafe, as well as in the displays. Staff who live locally are a link between the museum and its immediate community.

Museums can also consider their relationship to society globally. 'Museums are better suited than any other public entity to help us explore connections of the local to the global... Museums can play a critical role in moving the communities they serve towards a more sustainable future.'<sup>32</sup> They may need to think harder about balancing the needs of people in the UK and people across the world. Most museums reject illegally-exported objects and recognise their responsibilities towards communities that originated the collections they hold. How far does international responsibility extend: To using fair trade coffee in the cafe and selling fair trade goods in the shop? To supporting former colonies, from which cities or private benefactors derived their wealth? Do many museums have international touring and lending policies that serve a broad educational and cultural purpose rather than primarily aiming to raise income from rich countries that can pay handsomely?

**Q11 How does your museum aim to foster long-term relationships with audiences and communities? Does this conflict with acting as a visitor attraction?**

**Q12 How could your museum be a socially responsible enterprise?**

**Q13 How might your museum do more to contribute to and enhance the local economy?**

**Q14 How far might your museum aim to meet international responsibilities?**

Generally museums have a positive impact on society and their main challenge is to ensure that they deliver their social benefits in ways that are environmentally and economically sustainable. 'Being sustainable is not about stopping what we do; it's about being more thoughtful, more creative... If we look closely, sustainability offers massive opportunities.'<sup>33</sup>

The next two sections of this paper look at what ideas of sustainability might suggest in some museum-specific areas: public education and collections.



## 5 Sustainability as a museum message

A focus on sustainability can provide a topical way of interpreting collections and sites. Possibilities include, for example: in a design or industrial history context, the life cycle of products;<sup>34</sup> in natural history displays, the historic effects of a warmer climate; in social history or world cultures galleries, alternative more sustainable lifestyles, such as indigenous peoples or 'make do and mend' in the Second World War and other forms of reuse and recycling;<sup>35</sup> or in science displays, renewable energy or the contribution of impervious paving to flash flooding during heavy rainfall.<sup>36</sup>

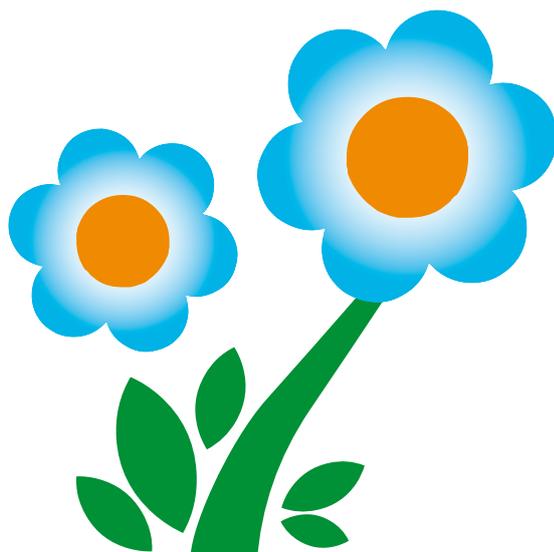
Museums can also use collections to research environmental change. This is most obvious with natural history collections, but there are many other examples such as palaeoenvironmental research on archaeology collections and research into historic weather patterns using ships' logs, or landscape paintings.<sup>37</sup>

Through its Turning Green initiative, the Rural Museums Network wants to 'plug the rural museum sector into perhaps the key issue of our time... engaging and involving visitors in the subject of sustainability' thereby 'bringing a new topicality to rural museums.'<sup>38</sup> The network is also supporting basic assessments of rural museums' carbon footprints.

Some argue that sustainability is such an important issue that museums should show leadership in their displays, exhibitions and programmes. The former arts minister, Estelle Morris wrote that museums have a 'unique position in being able to raise awareness and stimulate the public's interest' in sustainable development.<sup>39</sup> The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) says that museums 'have a pivotal role to play in showing the connections between the social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainable development, and making information about the issues more widely available.'<sup>40</sup> The Natural History Museum will 'bring objective evidence to the attention of our visiting public and present such evidence in such a compelling manner that individuals will make their own informed choices about their personal response to [climate change].'<sup>41</sup>

A former director of the International Council of Museums has written 'community museums and heritage education are among the best means of bringing people to the consciousness of their personal responsibility in the conservation and balanced utilisation of their environment and natural resources.'<sup>42</sup> Museums Australia believes that museums can 'promote individual and collective engagement with the ideas and issues of sustainability... People will be challenged to envisage a sustainable future so they will know what to aim for and can think through the consequences of their actions and behaviour.'<sup>43</sup>

Culture Northwest suggests that cultural organisations are well placed to influence people's behaviour because they 'are well used to communicating with diverse audiences – it's a core part of the business... They have the skills and the physical spaces to communicate with. [They can] help engender a sense of empathy with other communities, nationalities and countries – including those in the "firing line" of climate change... They are in a position to demonstrate to both the public and policymakers the values and ease of sustainable living... As a first step cultural organisations and their funders must make environmental responsibility a priority. Funders and policymakers must also ensure that cultural organisations know their role in creating a sustainable, viable society.'<sup>44</sup>



'Museums could take advantage of the unique position they occupy between the academic world and the general public to help move humanity onto a sustainable path.<sup>45</sup> 'Above all, we must strive to bring together the skills and knowledge of scholars in the human and natural sciences with the talents of museum interpreters, designers and crafts people. The challenge is to direct people's thoughts toward a consideration of our unsustainable ways of life and an exploration of the options.<sup>46</sup>

However, at present, few – if any – UK museums appear to be devoting a substantial part of their programming to sustainability.

There is an argument that, as some of society's most trusted institutions, museums should become exemplars of sustainability, commissioning green buildings<sup>47</sup> and aiming for the highest standards of operation, possibly displaying the techniques used, as at the Centre for Alternative Technology. In practice this is likely to mean fundamental changes in the way museums plan their future development, use energy, consume resources and engage with audiences.

The National Trust's Gibson Mill is one of the few heritage sites that aims to exemplify sustainability in all aspects of its work. The Arcola Theatre in London is an unusually inspiring example of a cultural organisation that approaches sustainability holistically.

**Q15 Do you have examples of museums displaying, encouraging debate about, or researching aspects of sustainability?**

**Q16 Might museums devote resources and space to encouraging public understanding of sustainability? If so, is this a role for all museums? What could your museum do?**

**Q17 Might museums aim to be exemplars of sustainability, leading society and setting the highest standards? If so, what might it involve and what would help your museum achieve this?**



## 6 Collections: an irreplaceable asset or an under-managed burden?

One of the key roles of museums, as defined in the MA Code of Ethics is to 'Safeguard the long-term public interest in the collections [which] are a tangible link between the past, present and future.' Indeed, one aspect of sustainability is that 'Neglect of cultural capital by allowing heritage to deteriorate, by failing to sustain cultural values [by not maintaining] the stock of tangible and intangible cultural capital [will] place cultural systems in jeopardy.'<sup>48</sup>

Until recently, museums have approached this responsibility rather passively, assuming that 'all museum collections should somehow be preserved for infinity'.<sup>49</sup> It has been estimated that as much as 70 per cent of museum costs can be attributed to the cost of collecting and safeguarding collections.<sup>50</sup> This may be an overestimate, but museums undoubtedly spend a significant amount on storing and caring for collections to a high standard so that they will be available to future generations. Museums have tended to adopt the precautionary principle that 'decisions which may lead to irreversible change should be approached with extreme caution and from a strongly risk-averse position.'<sup>51</sup> The MA Code of Ethics and the accreditation scheme used to urge 'a strong presumption against disposal'.

However, the flipside of cautious retention of collections is that they grow: 'the rate of acquisition far outstrips that of disposal.'<sup>52</sup> As Museums Australia says, collections 'may become a future liability if we fail to collect, conserve and document with our long-term liabilities in mind.'<sup>53</sup> Collections for the Future concluded: 'While disposing of an object always constitutes some kind of lost opportunity for future generations, so does its retention. The burden of caring for unwanted and unusable collections will tie our successors' hands just as much as the loss of something they might have valued.'<sup>54</sup>

These observations led to a revision of the MA Code of Ethics so that, in changes agreed in October 2007, 'Museums meet their responsibility to future generations' not by adopting a strong presumption against disposal, but instead 'by ensuring that collections are well managed and sustainable.' It will take some time to see the practical implications of this change, but it seems likely that museums will dispose more actively. 'Museums whose collections continue to grow while their existing collections lack effective management... seem not to be meeting the needs of the present in full because they are not able to realise the potential of the collections they hold and they are compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs by passing on these collections to them to look after, having added even more material to them.'<sup>55</sup>

Typically less than 10 per cent of a museum's collection is on display. To become sustainable museums need to become more mindful of why they are keeping the rest. Many museums are striving to make their stored collections more accessible and useful to today's audiences. Some are assessing the importance of their collections and making active decisions about what should be retained for the long term and what should be disposed of. Paradoxically, a museum may find it easier to justify the costs of retaining the majority of its collection if it thoughtfully disposes of a small part of it, rather than unthinkingly insisting on retaining everything.

Museums do not have to stop collecting, but they need to actively manage collections. 'We should free ourselves up to take our own responsibility for active stewardship of collections rather than feeling under the burden of slavish acceptance of our predecessors' decisions which have to be preserved intact for an indefinable posterity.'<sup>56</sup> Crucially, this approach is not based on practicalities of cost and storage space but on a recognition that museum collections are not an objective record of the world. Rather, they are 'partial, historically biased accumulations of the interests of previous individuals and... can be legitimately reworked'<sup>57</sup>. 'It is not a sign of despair but a mark of maturity to realise that we hand down not some eternal stock of artefacts and sites but, rather, an ever-changing array of evanescent relics.'<sup>58</sup>

**Q18 Does your museum know what it costs in money and energy to keep its existing collection? What about the long-term cost of adding to it?**

**Q19 How could your museum manage its collection more actively?**

**Q20 What criteria could help you decide what to keep and what to dispose of?**



## 7 Working sustainably: staff, skills and knowledge

Earlier sections of this paper have looked at resources such as money, energy and collections. A further essential resource is staff and the skills and knowledge that they embody. To thrive sustainably museums must have access to all the skills and knowledge they need. They need to become better at using the skills and knowledge of paid and voluntary staff and members of governing-bodies. Sustainability will also be improved if museums get better at recognising the transferability of skills from other types of organisation and are able to draw on the talents of a diverse range of staff.

Most museums could improve the way they nurture and develop staff by, for example, using appraisal schemes and supporting continuing professional development. There is a particular need to ensure that junior staff develop the experience, skills and knowledge that they require to progress to management roles. All staff need to regularly refresh their skills and knowledge. (People working for museums at all levels, but particularly senior management, need to understand sustainable development.)

Few museums try to anticipate their future requirements for staff. To be sustainable they need to improve succession planning in areas where skills and knowledge may be in short supply. Museums also need systems to enable them to retain skills and knowledge when individuals leave the organisation.

Too often collections-related knowledge exists only in the heads of individuals and so it leaves at the same time as the individual. The Monument Fellowships being piloted by the MA are allowing a few individuals to pass on their knowledge to their former employer, but museums need to be far more systematic in succession planning - and managing collections-related knowledge in general.<sup>59</sup> Often the knowledge contained in an exhibition disappears when the exhibition ends. The sector also needs to make collections-related expertise available to museums without specialist staff and to train new generations of collections specialists.

As essential skills will often be outside individual museums, the sector needs to have effective systems and processes for sharing information about good practice. Sector bodies are improving the way information about the operation of museums is recorded and made accessible through, for example, museum development officers, Museum Practice, Collections Link and a variety of toolkits. However, people working for museums do not always seem aware of best practice and there appears to be a tendency to reinvent the wheel.

**Q21 How might the museum sector and its support organisations improve systems and processes for sharing good practice?**

**Q22 How might individual museums, and the sector, improve the approach to developing, managing and sharing collections-related knowledge?**



## 8 Managing growth or going slow: is there a sustainable future?

From many points of view, the UK museum sector seems in good health. The past generation has seen growth in many areas. Expectations are higher, many museums are bigger and collections continue to grow. There are more museums offering more services for more visitors. Many even have modestly increased funding. Indeed, it is a mark of success that museums live with the expectation of growth in so many areas of their work.

However, some of this apparently successful growth may be weakening museums' sustainability. Museums have a tendency to 'over-trade'. A particular problem in recent decades has been opening new or expanded buildings without an accompanying increase in revenue funding.<sup>60</sup>

'When funding is available it is often a one-off investment linked to a new building – a "poison pill" that leaves museums with higher future operating costs but no guarantee of future revenue. With certain notable exceptions, the visitor numbers generated by new buildings start to drop off soon after the third year... The increased operating costs of new buildings can injure – or even kill – a new institution and paralyse an older one. The Louvre, for example, was forced to keep over a quarter of its collections closed to the public due to the high cost of extra staff following its billion-dollar expansion in the 1980s.'<sup>61</sup>

'In 20 years we have seen that most museum expansions improve the visitor experience and raise the number of visitors. [However] all increase the cost of operations *more* than the increase in revenue from visitors.'<sup>62</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that museum expansions usually increase the energy cost per visit, too. Furthermore, 'museums think that they are renewing themselves simply by constructing or refurbishing a building, whereas in fact an old organisation in a new skin is still the same organisation as previously, only more tired than before.'<sup>63</sup>

Sustainable development does not necessarily mean that a museum has to stop growing (although it might in some areas), but it does mean that growth has to be justifiable and carefully planned and managed. But museums are eventually likely to be forced to reduce their carbon emissions, which means that a tendency towards ever-larger energy-hungry buildings will have to be reversed. Perhaps any museum extensions should be designed to not increase the museum's overall consumption of energy and other natural resources?

Museums depend on a range of resources, including: collections, money, community support, ideas and knowledge, staff, buildings and natural resources such as energy and water. Museums risk becoming unsustainable if any of their key resources are over stretched: an increase in any one resource cannot compensate for a shortage of one of the others.<sup>64</sup> If museums are to be sustainable they need to take a long-term view of all their resource use.

To be sustainable museums need to take a holistic view of their work from economic, social and environmental points of view. An increasingly common approach to this is 'triple bottom-line accounting' in which an organisation reports each year on its social and environmental performance, as well as its financial results. Many museums already report their numbers of users – but few use more subtle measures of social impact. A few organisations report on their environmental impact. The National Trust, for example, plans to report each year on its use of energy and water and the volume of waste it produces. Having established a reporting mechanism it can set targets for environmental performance as well as financial and social performance. Note, again, that it is not possible to 'balance' or trade off one against another, as the environment will eventually limit what can be achieved socially and economically. Museums will also want their suppliers of goods and services to be committed to sustainability

Sustainability suggests we may need to plan for a steadier state. Instead of trying to increase the size of collections, audiences, services and buildings we may need a new focus on excellence and the quality of what we do. 'Although museums often regard attendance as a major performance parameter... it is unwise to equate popularity with external usefulness or individual enlightenment.'<sup>65</sup> 'The belief in limitless growth should be a cause for serious concern among the many museums that have staked their future on attendance figures, architectural vanity and culture as entertainment.'<sup>66</sup>

We might aim to communicate more deeply with regular visitors, in higher quality (but no larger) spaces thereby 'generating a slowly growing base of users and not obsess about getting more one-off visitors.'<sup>67</sup> If we are to retain public support, it will be crucial to reconcile this with the desirability of continuing to develop new diverse audiences.

Sustainability might imply a slower pace of change. Museums already move slowly; they are often criticised for it and some displays are still hopelessly out of date. But in many cases slowness might be a strength. Slow, thoughtful development can enhance public trust and can mean museums are surer of the ground before moving forwards. Taking the long view comes naturally to museums (even if long-term planning doesn't)! 'They can be havens that allow us to slow down from our otherwise fast-paced lives – the pause that refreshes.'<sup>68</sup> Some museums might helpfully align themselves with the international 'slow' movement which is concerned with promoting quality of life, protecting the environment and promoting a sense of local distinctiveness, values which chime with many museum aims.<sup>69</sup>

Sustainability might also imply a move away from blockbuster exhibitions and spectacular renewal through dramatic once-in-a-generation redisplay to a more gradual, continual approach to change and renewal of displays that is designed to encourage repeat visits by local audiences. 'Many museums have made a choice, knowingly or unknowingly, to pursue popularity and increased revenues through high-profile exhibitions and architectural sensationalism. This strategy is so consumptive of staff and money that there is often little left to pursue other activities... Blockbuster exhibitions have certainly demonstrated their ability to bring in crowds and revenue, but in ways much like an addictive substance. The impact is fast and undeniable, but quickly dissolves in the quest for more, and there is never enough.'<sup>70</sup> There is also an environmental cost: 'Every six months or so, a large exhibition will be totally destroyed and another built in its place. Numerous skips of reusable materials are sent to landfill, while new walls are built, often inches from the position of those just removed.'<sup>71</sup>

For sustainability perhaps 'we must look towards "lightweight", flexible projects that take advantage of the museum's collections, not heavyweight blockbusters that disrupt the museum's priorities and distort its identity.'<sup>72</sup> There might be less of a distinction between 'temporary' exhibitions and 'permanent' galleries<sup>73</sup> and more use of modular, inexpensive and changeable display techniques.<sup>74</sup>

A sustainable approach might extend to the museum sector as a whole. A sustainable museum sector, able to thrive on relatively flat natural and financial resources, might be one in which every time a museum opens or grows, another closes or shrinks.

'Sustainability is not a "goal" to be pursued in a linear way, such that it will be "achieved" after a certain amount of time, but rather it is a path, a new approach and a set of values that have to be constantly reinforced... We could think of museum collections as ecosystems or habitats, which need managing, developing, sometimes growing, sometimes cutting back to prevent choking.'<sup>75</sup>

To become sustainable, museums will need to be more willing to adapt to change and much more realistic and assertive about what they can and cannot deliver with available resources – and clearer about what society actually wants and needs from them. Sustainable museums, and a sustainable museum sector, may require us to revisit many of our assumptions that more is better.

**Q23 How could your museum focus more on excellence and less on quantity, while still diversifying audiences?**

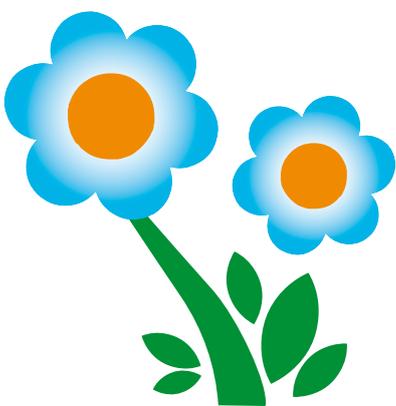
**Q24 Might museums – and the sector as a whole – aim for a 'steady state' in which visitor numbers are largely stable and requirements for funding and natural resources do not increase significantly?**

**Q25 How likely are museums to be realistic and assertive about what they can and cannot deliver for their funding?**

**Q26 How might your museum reduce the financial and energy cost of each visit?**

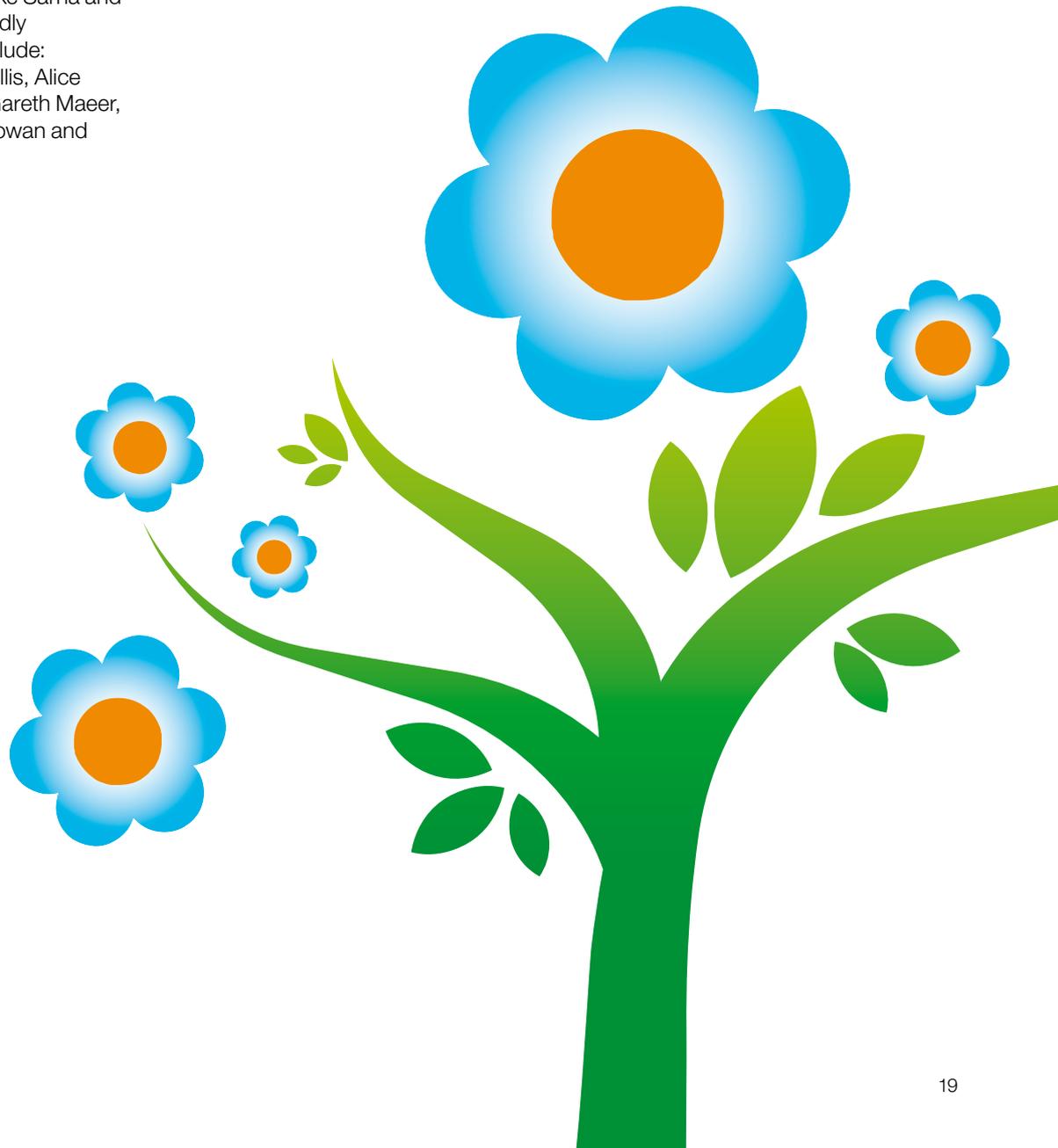
**Q27 What targets might your museum set to ensure it becomes more sustainable?**

**Q28 Are there ways in which your museum could grow sustainably?**



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# Summary of questions for discussion



Please send your comments by 1 September 2008 to [sustainability@museumsassociation.org](mailto:sustainability@museumsassociation.org) or to Sustainability Consultation, Museums Association, 24 Calvin Street, London E1 6NW

## Overarching questions

**Q1** Do you agree that museums need to think about sustainability? Are there important aspects of it that we have missed?

**Q2** What are the main difficulties your museum faces in becoming more sustainable?

**Q3** How can the MA and other bodies working on behalf of the sector support change?

## Principles

**Q4** What changes would you suggest to these draft principles for sustainable museums? Which are the most important?

## Economic sustainability

**Q5** Do you have examples of museums doing less, better?

**Q6** How might better coordination, partnerships – and perhaps mergers – between museums make the sector more economically sustainable?

## Environmental sustainability Collections

**Q7** Do you think that collection-care, loan and government-indemnity standards should be reviewed or used more flexibly, with a view to reducing energy use?

**Q8** How can your museum reduce its energy use? Do you monitor your energy use? What difficulties do you anticipate in reducing energy use?

**Q9** How might you design or adapt museum buildings and exhibitions to reduce your environmental impact?

**Q10** How might your museum change what it does to reduce the environmental impact made by you and your visitors?

## Social sustainability

**Q11** How does your museum aim to foster long-term relationships with audiences and communities? Does this conflict with acting as a visitor attraction?

**Q12** How could your museum be a socially responsible enterprise?

**Q13** How might your museum do more to contribute to and enhance the local economy?

**Q14** How far might your museum aim to meet international responsibilities?

## Sustainability as a museum message

**Q15** Do you have examples of museums displaying, encouraging debate about, or researching aspects of sustainability?

**Q16** Might museums devote resources and space to encouraging public understanding of sustainability? If so, is this a role for all museums? What could your museum do?

**Q17** Might museums aim to be exemplars of sustainability, leading society and setting the highest standards? If so, what might it involve and what would help your museum achieve this?

**Q18** Does your museum know what it costs in money and energy to keep its existing collection? What about the long-term cost of adding to it?

**Q19** How could your museum manage its collection more actively?

**Q20** What criteria could help you decide what to keep and what to dispose of?

## Staff, skills and knowledge

**Q21** How might the museum sector and its support organisations improve systems and processes for sharing good practice?

**Q22** How might individual museums, and the sector, improve the approach to developing, managing and sharing collections-related knowledge?

## Is there a sustainable future?

**Q23** How could your museum focus more on excellence and less on quantity, while still diversifying audiences?

**Q24** Might museums – and the sector as a whole – aim for a ‘steady state’ in which visitor numbers are largely stable and requirements for funding and natural resources do not increase significantly?

**Q25** How likely are museums to be realistic and assertive about what they can and cannot deliver for their funding?

**Q26** How might your museum reduce the financial and energy cost of each visit?

**Q27** What targets might your museum set to ensure it becomes more sustainable?

**Q28** Are there ways in which your museum could grow sustainably?

## To respond

Please send your comments by 1 September 2008 to [sustainability@museumsassociation.org](mailto:sustainability@museumsassociation.org) or to Sustainability Consultation, Museums Association, 24 Calvin Street, London E1 6NW

# Footnotes

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