unlocking local treasure

collections management and the local authority museum
This leaflet is aimed at helping elected members and non-specialist staff in local authorities to make the most of the very valuable assets that they already own.

It explores the benefits that a well-managed museum or gallery collection brings to a local authority and the people whom it serves.

It describes ways of capitalising on the strengths of an existing collection, such as borrowing works from other collections, or developing new ways of bringing collections to a wider range of people.

It looks at how local authorities can develop their collections by adding to them through acquisitions, enlivening them through loans and rationalising through disposal.

Museums and galleries are so much more than tourist attractions. They are sources of inspiration, enjoyment and learning that enrich a community in a unique way.

In their museum collections, local authorities hold in trust the treasures and the histories of our towns, cities and rural areas. They tell our stories, record our achievements and celebrate our artistic endeavours; they are our key to unlocking and understanding the past.

But museum collections also have other important roles to play in supporting the work of local authorities.

Museums and galleries can make a significant contribution to the creative industries, providing opportunities for artists through employment and exhibitions, and delivering education programmes, as well as providing inspirational source material for their own work.
collections management

Effective stewardship of objects and artefacts has its own ‘tricks of the trade’ which, when properly practised, can bring significant benefits to any museum or gallery.

unlocking stored treasures

It’s estimated that sometimes only ten per cent of museums’ collections nationally are on display at any one time – which means that our museum stores hold objects which could be delighting the public if only there was space to show them. Not everything in store is intended or suitable for display - collections serve as an invaluable community asset and resource for academic researchers and historians (professional and amateur), as well as educators of all kinds.

Some forward-thinking museums have turned this ‘storage problem’ into an opportunity. Tyne and Wear Museums and Beamish, the open-air museum, operate a joint storage facility on the Beamish site and invited local community groups to deposit their collections there.

Besides storage space, the groups – which range from an embroiderers’ guild to a junior football club – have access to the expertise of staff and a small temporary exhibition space. It has created a thriving community service in a way that every other local authority service could strive to match.

Innovation is not reliant on the staffing and funding levels of the bigger museums. Tucked into a space between two supermarkets and shared with the library service, Ludlow’s small museum resource centre gives local people access to previously-hidden collections of geology, natural history, social history and art.

Frequently used for school education purposes, the collections are also used as the basis for a popular series of courses designed for adults: “the people who come along tend to be older and often they see learning about the collections as a way of keeping their minds active,” says Ludlow’s curator Daniel Lockett.
acquisitions – when it’s good to give ... and right to buy

Museums acquire new objects in a variety of ways. A common method is donations when paintings, objects or other artefacts are given or bequeathed to a museum by their owner for the public to enjoy.

Any proposed donation has to be assessed in terms of the museum’s collections policy, however; it’s no good, for example, to expect a museum that collects tanks to jump at the offer of a donation of 19th century seaside postcards. (But even when a donation doesn’t fit their particular bill, museum staff can often suggest where the object might find a good home).

Museums also actively seek out objects to buy. This might sound strange in these days of a booming art market that puts the most valuable items well beyond the reach of the larger budgets of national museums in the UK let alone those run by local authorities.

So is there any point in local authority museums, seemingly priced out of an over-excited market, even indulging in a spot of ‘window shopping’? The answer, most certainly, is yes.

Several bodies such as the National Heritage Memorial Fund, Heritage Lottery Fund and the Art Fund have been set up precisely to help museums to acquire costly items for the benefit of the public. One such organisation is the V&A Purchase Grant fund which allocated individual grants of up to £80,000 (2007) to LA museums services in 2006-2007.
There are many reasons to spend precious money in this fashion; the purchased object may, for example, have particular local or regional significance or may fill an important gap in a collection. Similarly, acquisitions can reflect contemporary issues or reveal the stories and contribution of different groups such as immigrant communities.

Moreover, a new purchase can attract publicity, bring in new audiences and reveal connections with local or national history that have been forgotten.

**Luton case study**

In 2006, Luton Museums Service fought off competition from none other than New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art to acquire the Wenlok Jug, a rare medieval bronze object with strong local connections.

The asking price was £750,000 – rather out of the reach of Luton’s £2,500 acquisitions budget. The museum prevailed, however, by raising the balance from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the museum friends, charitable trusts and generous individuals.

“The jug complemented our collecting policy,” says Maggie Appleton, museums service manager at Luton. “It was owned by a Luton man and the name Wenlok is used in Luton in a road name, school name and for a chapel in the medieval church where one of the Wenloks is buried. It also linked well with the national political scene in medieval times and strengthened our medieval collection which isn’t particularly strong.”

“It did indeed raise our profile and we have used it in an exciting project to engage local communities with the museums service. The jug was commissioned very much as a status symbol by its owner and we have used it to discuss issues of identity with school and youth groups who have made clay replicas of the jug to represent themselves as Lutonians.”

The jug will have pride of place in Luton’s new visitor centre as part of the £6.2m redevelopment of one of its sites … with the young people’s replicas displayed alongside.
loans – both a lender and a borrower be

Rather like football teams looking to add temporary zest to the midfield without paying Premiership prices, museums often lend each other items to add a new dimension to existing collections.

This also, of course, gives the public at large a chance to view an object or a painting that they otherwise would not have seen in their home town.

Many – though by no means all – of the top crowd-pulling objects are held by national museums and negotiating to borrow such items has not always been easy in the past. The good news is that there are now several schemes, such as the British Museum’s Partnership UK programme, which are making loans between institutions a much smoother process.

The British Museum itself has lent more than 1,800 objects annually to other non-national museums in recent years as part of touring exhibitions or for display in temporary exhibitions.

All museums, no matter what size, can benefit from borrowing and lending and the Museums Association’s Effective Collections programme is working to help make it easier for museums to share their precious collections with the public.

North-west case study
Four museum services in the north-west of England joined forces to mount a touring exhibition of contrasting works of British art 1900-1950, drawing on the collective strengths of their important collections, as well as including major loans from galleries in the region.

The project enabled all the museums to exchange expertise as well as resources and was supported by education workshops on the artworks for primary and secondary schools. Levels of interest from visitors were so high that a second exhibition is planned.

“The collaboration gave a massive boost to our audiences,” says Stephen Whittle, museum manager for Gallery Oldham. “Our attendances alone rose by 68 per cent and 51 per cent came from outside Oldham itself. It proves that there is a big demand out there for this kind of art.”
unlocking local treasure
online – a wide world of wonder

Engaging new audiences and extending access to collections beyond ‘traditional’ museum-goers have been key goals for museums and cultural services in recent years.

Many have found that the answer lies in offering online access to their collections, particularly as evidence suggests that the public – who may still see museums as a physical space to explore heritage – now expects a website to be part of the package.

Museum websites can be much more than tools to advertise opening hours or forthcoming exhibitions. They can also provide an opportunity to highlight individual objects from the collections along with all the information associated with them and suggestions for further study, for example.

In this way, knowledge about museum or gallery collections can be made available to a far wider range of people across the world – from schoolchildren and others interested in local history to family historians and academic researchers.

Research by the Collections Trust (formally the MDA), an advisory body to museums, also shows that a dedicated, high-quality museum website – distinct from the local authority’s own – can raise the authority’s profile amongst new groups of users.

Manchester case study

As part of a project to bring the information and documentation attached to its collections up to standard, Manchester’s museums and galleries have digitised much of their material and made it available online.
They looked specifically at parts of the collections that were in store and under-used but which could be used to appeal to more diverse audiences.

“We were very aware that only a small proportion of the collection is on show at any one time,” says Ruth Shrigley; principal manager, Collections Access at Manchester City Galleries. “We wanted to improve the way that we manage collections-related information. If you have good information in an accessible form, it makes it so much easier for the other staff, such as those working in education, to develop their services to reach a broader audience, and enables virtual users to benefit from collections that are in store.”
‘Disposal’ – the permanent removal of an item from a museum collection – can be a sensitive issue. Like all museum collections, those cared for by local authorities evolve over time. Museum collections shouldn’t be static, they need to be reviewed and developed to engage today’s and tomorrow’s public. An important part of reviewing collections means considering whether some items should be disposed of.

A museum might choose to dispose of an item for a number of reasons. It may not fit with the rest of the collection; the museum might be unable to provide the necessary care for the object or have the in-house skills to interpret and display it in context; it might be a duplicate or damaged.

But just because an object does not fit with one particular museum collection, this does not mean it is worthless. Some items might be more relevant to another museum, some may be better off in schools or other public organisations where they will get more use.

Whatever the method of disposal, it can bring with it significant long-term benefits; provided that the process is well-managed and part of a well thought-out approach to the overall development of a museum collection.

Undertaking disposal specifically to raise funds will always be controversial. Local councils will need to consider this very carefully. It will involve treading a fine line between the professional ethics, where disposal to raise funds is insufficient justification in all but the most rare and exceptional circumstances, those in the community concerned about selling the family silver, and the extreme financial pressures that are occasionally a natural part of government.

In these rare circumstances there are no magic formulas for reaching a decision, or easy ways to reconcile democratic accountability with professional ethics. There are just extremely tough choices that have to be looked at case by case. Fortunately help and advice is available to local authorities from the Museums Association and the Museums Libraries and Archives Council, who can provide advice and guidance for any museum unsure about a possible disposal.

Norfolk case study
Norfolk Museums Service has recently embarked on a programme of rationalisation for Lynn Museum, part of which involves disposal.

disposal – the art of letting go
Key to persuading councillors of the wisdom of the move was the fact that Norfolk’s policy followed MA best practice guidelines on disposal as well as the Museums Libraries and Archives museum accreditation rules.

Vanessa Trevelyan, head of Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, says that, in general, selling items from a collection is “the last option before destruction.”

“But in this case, disposal benefits the museum as it essentially good housekeeping.”

“We are letting go of objects which are not relevant or pertinent to the history of King’s Lynn. Removing them means that we will be able to devote more resources to the things that are of primary importance to the history of King’s Lynn,” she says.
The following organisations can help you find out more about making the most of your collections:

The Museums Association is the professional body representing people and institutions constituting the UK’s museums: www.museumsassociation.org

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council is the strategic body working with and for the museums, archives and libraries sector, they are a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB), sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS): www.mla.gov.uk