To improve use of museum stored collections:

- Museums should recognize that their collections are public resources and hence that they have an obligation to make them publicly available. There is increasing public demand for access to collections.
- Museums should actively advertise and market the availability of collections, as they do other services.
- Museums should tell users how to access or visit collections in store. They should provide examples to give people ideas on how collections could be used.
- Standards for accreditation should include benchmarks for collections access and use. Collections-related grants should require evidence of increased access to be produced.

In addition:

- Some museums found to be making good use of their collections have a collections access officer who liaises with local groups and facilitate collections programming and use. While not found to be essential, those that had such a post found it invaluable.
- Curators should consider the focus of their role: what are the benefits of devoting effort to exhibitions; or to answering enquiries; or to generating and facilitating other uses of collections? This consideration could fit with developing greater knowledge of collections.
- Museums should mainstream collaboration and partnerships with services in other sectors, offering engagement with collections as a service for example; volunteer activities planned with agencies working with the disadvantaged.

"Museum management needs to understand how to break down the market for use into a series of niche markets, understanding the needs of each... the profession must re-prioritise the specialist, enthusiast and academic use of collections... as part of the way in which knowledge regarding the collections is developed."

Museum survey response
Collections for People is a research project from UCL addressing the use of museum stored collections as a public resource. It investigated current use of collections that remain in store, and the use of museum stored collections as a public resource. Collections in UK museums grew enormously in the latter half of the 20th century (yet museum collections, mostly maintained at public expense, are perceived as an underused resource. The Museums Association’s 2005 report, Collections for the Future, together with press comments and books such as Treasure on Earth (2002) and Fragments of the World (2003), brought this issue into sharp focus. Collections for People set out to understand the scale of museum stored collections, and the main parameters of their access and use:

- What is the size and nature of collections as a resource?
- How are they distributed, geographically and among different types of museums?
- How much are different types of collection used by people other than museum staff?
- What sort of people use collections?
- What do they use them for: research, teaching and learning, creative activities, visits for enjoyment such as store tours?
- How do users perceive this service? Do museums actively market collections to users?
- Are collections accessible to users?
- What are the factors associated with greater use of collections?
- What do museums see as the barriers to more use?

All museums in England and Wales were invited to complete a questionnaire in summer 2007. The survey resulted in a sample representative of the general museum demographics that provided the basis for statistically significant analysis. Research with users took place in early 2008.

A full report of the findings of the research is available at:

www.ucl.ac.uk/kollectcollections

www.collectionslink.org.uk/khiwce_collection

Establishing the size and nature of museum collections is no easy task; nevertheless we do now know a great deal. The Collections for People research does not contradict the generally accepted estimate of 200 million items in collections.

The number of visitors to stored collections, or users, is low overall. Only 25% of museums in the sample reported 400 or more users a year. Within these a full range of museum types and sizes is represented. Overall, museums reported from 0 to 14,000 visitors a year to their collections.

52% of museums report increasing public demand for access to collections, with 45% reporting steady demand and only 7 of 222 reporting a decrease in recent years. Museum respondents think that collections are insufficiently used.

The most commonly reported collections use is research, but education, conservation, memory and identity, creative uses and sheer enjoyment are also noted as well. Less-used collections that are often seen as-rare-fine-are notably include geology and ethnographic collections.

Digital issues are also important. While users mainly prefer to find information about collections from online listings, museums report that they deal with most enquiries through individual contact by telephone, email or letter.

In practice, there are different levels of collections engagement from open public or group visits, to special experiences through targeted programmes; to reporting or even past experiences for a few; sometimes delivering important social benefits. This is reflected in the range of provision from open stores to individual appointments for researchers.

This service offers an important opportunity for museums to be highly creative in serving niche markets, offering interesting experiences to users. A wide variety of ways of providing access to collections was found.