*"Whole purpose of museums is to make things available to the public."**

A new report shows that independents are in the top 20% for innovative use of undisplayed artefacts. *Dr Suzanne Keene* of University College London has analysed her data relating specifically to independents

Using stored collections in independent museums

Issues of whether collections in museums are sufficiently well used are as pertinent for independent museums as for those which are publicly funded. Independent museums are just as likely, if not more so, to view their collections as central to their existence, and through grants, Gift Aid and so on they receive significant public funding.

The recently published *Collections for People* report sets out the results of a UCL research project which investigated how much collections were used or accessed by non-museum staff (interpreted broadly), and what factors differentiated museums with more or fewer collections users. Examining the data further, are independent museums any different from the other museums in the sample?

Of the total of 263 museums that responded to the survey, 122 (46%) were independently funded. In size, their collections and staff numbers followed distributions similar to those in the sample as a whole, although none were in the extreme higher parts of either range. So we must look for differences in other factors.

One possible contrast is in collections user numbers. The survey established, for the first time, how much stored collections were used or accessed, whether by individual researchers or by public visits to stores. Among all museums, 20% had 400 or more users a year (about 10 a week), and that group was compared with the museums with fewer users. Among the independent museums, 10 out of the 73 (14%) that provided this information were 'more-users' museums – a distinctly lower proportion than that overall. Though indicative, the statistics on this were not conclusive.

Did respondents think that their collections were sufficiently well used? In non-independent museums 79% of respondents said collections were insufficiently used; in the independent museums, the figure was only 44%. *". . . I hesitate to say that the stored collection consists only of dross, accumulated over the 185 years of our existence, but that is pretty much the truth. . . ."*

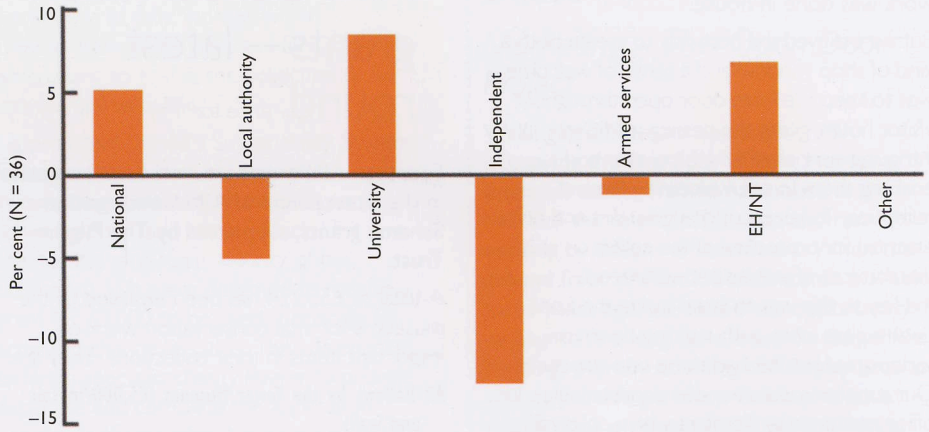
A good reason for this might be because independent museums have more of their collections on display: a number of respondents said this, but it is not possible to check it statistically. *"Most of the paintings we have in storage would not be on display in any case (poor quality/poor condition)."*

Other possible reasons are lack of staff and space – both identified generally as top 'obstacles' to use. There were, naturally, many mentions of volunteers from independent museums – sometimes as positive factors, sometimes as constraints. *". . . we are a volunteer museum and have limited resources but a professional approach!" "It's all down to us volunteers being available and giving our time to the ever increasing requests"*

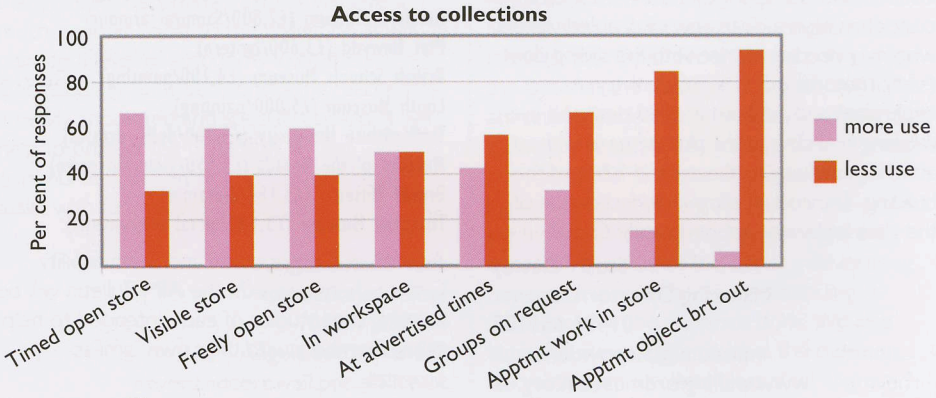
Regarding space, it is true that in both independent and other museums the average storage area among the more-users museums was considerably higher than that in the fewer-users ones. Yet, *"More people ask about stored collections in more recent years. The store has not increased in size, the public see 50% of the stores via handling events."*

However, surprisingly, the number of staff and size of collection were not associated with the amount of access to collections, and the statistics show the same for the independent museums. *"Although we have only one member of curatorial staff and no guaranteed revenue funding . . . we still have a long way to go before lack of staff time, money, space or other resources restrict public access. Our collections are well documented and not of a type to raise many security issues. I wouldn't say lack of public interest – as I don't think the public know enough about what is in the collections to know whether or not they are interested – so lack of readily available public information is the main obstacle."*

The research found only two factors strongly associated with having more collections users. One was how strongly museums promoted collections access, and the other was how they provided it. Not surprisingly, museums that promoted access (especially through the press) were likely to have more users – as were those that provided for group or unrestricted public



Top, the proportions of museums in the top and lower user number groups. The chart compares the proportion in the top 20% of museums of each type with that expected if the proportions were the same as in the types of museum overall. Below, means of accessing collections in independent museums related to more or fewer users of collections.



Making the stuff accessible

National Museums at Chatham is a project specifically aimed at utilising stored collections. In a partnership with the National Maritime Museum and the Imperial War Museum the project will house and display the national museum partners' maritime model collections within No. 1 Smithery, a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

access, rather than only, or mainly, for individuals: group access is more access.

Analysing the statistics for independent museums, the same is true. Among independent museum respondents with more users (but there were only 10), 30% promoted access strongly or fairly strongly – and only 5% of those in the 61 with fewer users. And among the museums strongly or modestly promoting access, 86% said they were finding increased demand.

What sort of independent museums are in the 'more-users' group? As with the sample in general, they include all sorts – large object collections, highly specialist collections, small local museums. The specialist museums include collections such as costume and textiles that would not normally be thought a candidate for much access.

Independent museums, therefore, seem to be similar to museums in general as far as collections access is concerned. By providing for access through stores tours, open stores, open days, events and so on more could probably achieve at least the modest amount of collections use that characterises the 'more-users' museums. Many imaginative ways of providing for collections access that were much enjoyed by the providers are described in the research report. *"When we developed the access centre (which has a computer database to the collection and photocopies of much of the paper archive records and scanned photos) we were worried that there would be an increase in enquiries that we would not be able to cope with. But this hasn't happened which is a relief. For example we don't get as many speculative enquiries."*

Finally, a thought about footfall. Numbers through the door have been in the past almost the only criterion for success among museums. Access to collections will inevitably be for fewer people, yet there is the possibility of experiences that may be highly valued. The National Trust has developed a model that usefully encapsulates this for their property, Tyntesfield. It is, they say,

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

Those who follow current museum politics will have noticed the McMaster Review which calls for excellence rather than targets, defining this in terms that recall those inspirational or pivotal experiences: *"The time has come to reclaim the word 'excellence' from its historic, elitist undertones and to recognise that the very best art and culture is for everyone; that it has the power to change people's lives, regardless of class, education or ethnicity."* – James Purnell, Secretary of State for Culture Media & Sport: Foreword to the McMaster Review.

Further information can be found on the research website, http://www.ucl.ac.uk/storedcollections/. Copies of the report can be downloaded or obtained free of charge from Eleanor Lovegrove, Collections Trust, 22 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 1JP.
Email: eleanor@collectionstrust.org.uk

*Survey comments from respondents for independent museums are italicised.

The Museums Association is organising an event, *Open up! – Stored collections as a public resource*, London, 27 January 2009. http://www.museums association.org/events/openupstored collections

In Brief

Philanthropy aims revised following economic downturn

Key messages on philanthropy drawn up by the Private Giving for the Public Good campaign group (run by the National Museum Directors' Conference) have been updated in view of the economic downturn. The campaign is committed to the introduction of a lifetime gifts policy, but this is unlikely to be introduced in the current climate. Instead it will take the long view, producing a research paper and conference next year to build the evidence base and case. Meanwhile it will campaign for significantly raising the percentage and cash limits relating to benefits for Gift Aid donors, or simply allowing an uncapped percentage of donation in benefit to the donor. Those who give to arts and culture should be celebrated more publicly, it adds, for example appearing more often in the public honours list.

Heritage and natural environment can help in the economic gloom

National Trust director-general Dame Fiona Reynolds said the economic downturn was an opportunity for society to rethink its priorities and consider a longer-term and greener approach. Speaking at the NT annual meeting in Liverpool, she said heritage and the natural environment could play a key role in meeting these needs, providing a means for improving quality of life. The NT came into being 100 years ago to provide people with the opportunity for spiritual, intellectual and physical refreshment. "Although circumstances have changed dramatically, the need for opportunities to see, feel and have access to places that can touch people's hearts remains as strong as ever."

Grassroots money

Smaller museums may be able to take advantage of Grassroots Grants, a £130 million scheme aimed at local community groups, running from 2008-2011. It divides into two parts – an £80 million fund for local funders and community organisations and a £50 million endowments programme to enable local funders to generate additional donations on a matched basis and invest them in endowments. Higher-rate taxpayers could see their net gifts increase by up to 333% as the Government adds Gift Aid and then matches every gift-aided donation. Thus, for a donation of £77,000 the local charity could receive £256,000. Further information: Grassroots Grants helpline on 01223 400331, or the Community Development Foundation website, http://cdf.vbnlive.com/bfora/systems/xmlviewer/default.asp?arg=DS_CDF_TECHART_23/_page.xsl/27&xsl_argx=3