national museum directors' conference

nmdc

National Museums
Working in Partnership Across the UK

Why are museum partnerships important?

National museums are committed to ensuring people around the UK have access to their collections, exhibitions and expertise, and are actively involved in collaborative working with regional museums.

Partnerships between national and regional museums give people right across the UK the opportunity to access the national collections and benefit from excellent museum provision, including a wider range of exhibitions, learning initiatives and community engagement projects.

Working in partnership allows both national and regional museum partners to increase their audiences, develop innovative programmes, share expertise and develop their staff, as well as being a valuable way of maximising impact and resources.

> Across 16 national institutions the total number of projects undertaken with regional museum partners across the UK in 2008-09 was well over 1600.

Why did we do this project?

While an impressive amount of partnership work between national and regional museums is already happening, with some national museums planning their partnership working in a very strategic way, the National Museums Directors' Conference (NMDC) recognises that more could to be done to ensure that partnership working across the UK is as joined up, strategic and as effective as possible.

NMDC undertook a survey of its members' 2008-09 partnership activity to gain a better understanding of the current spread of partnership working across the UK.

The findings informed development of a set of recommendations to improve and develop partnership working between national and regional museums.

What do we mean by partnership working?

All national museums undertake collaborative work with regional partners in one form or another, with types of activity varying according to each organisation's own aims, needs and resources.

Current partnership working between national and regional museums takes many forms, including:

- long and short term object loans, from and to both national and regional partners
- touring exhibitions and collaborative exhibition projects
- joint learning, digital and audience development projects
- joint scholarship and collections research
- staff exchanges, mentoring and sharing of expertise
- brand use and profile-building.

Models of partnership working also vary widely, from formal partnership agreements between individual museums and long-term strategic programmes to short term project-based partnerships. Although this NMDC project has focussed on collaborative work between museums, there is also a huge amount of partnership activity undertaken with other types of bodies such as educational and research institutions, community groups, local, national and international cultural sector bodies, Local Authorities and private sector organisations.

Key survey findings

- Across 16 national institutions the **total number of projects** undertaken with partners across the UK in 2008-09 was well **over 1600**. This includes all types of partnership activity, including loan agreements (but not individual loan objects) and is likely to be a vast underestimate of the total UK figure.

- Although it is often difficult to quantify the direct **costs of participating in partnerships**, the total figure for 10 national museums which estimated how much they spent in 2008-09 was **over £2.5million**, which in most cases excludes staff time and in-house resources (such as exhibition production costs).

- **Loan activity** is strong, with nearly 80% of survey respondents describing their loans services as good and sustainable. However barriers remain, with the cost of loans, particularly transport, and expectations on both sides, especially around standards, being deterrents to action.

- There is **good provision for learning**, with three quarters of loans and exhibitions in 2008-09 routinely supported by access to specialists in learning.

- There are significant opportunities around **digital access** to collections and exhibitions, with less than a quarter of loans and exhibitions supported by digital packages.

- **Informal relationships** and friendships between staff remain a primary way of building collections knowledge and developing partnerships, which can be a barrier to organisations without existing contacts in other museums.

- There is considerable **difficulty in quantifying partnership activity** including assessing the level of collaborative research and scholarship, counting the number of loans, estimating impact and quantifying the cost of partnerships. Data is often only comprehensively recorded when required by funding bodies.

All partnerships – map of regional museums with which national museums worked in partnership on all types of activity in 2008-09
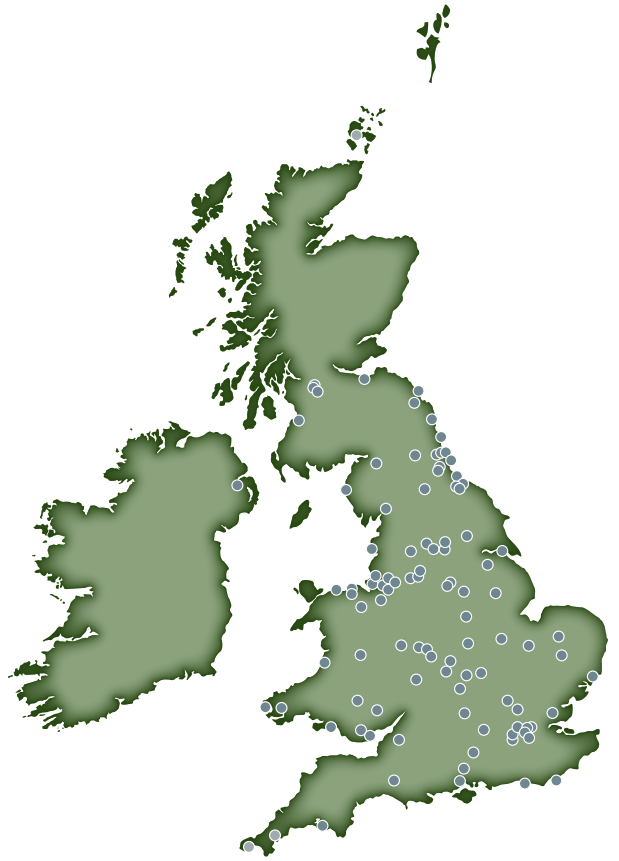
Strengths

Strengths of current partnership working include:

- The **sheer number** of national-regional museum partnerships.

- An increasing understanding of the principles of partnership, and a more **strategic approach** from an increasing number of institutions.

- The importance of **sustained government funding**, in particular:

  - *Renaissance in the Regions* – central government funding to improve museum provision across the English regions – has allowed regional museums to build internal capacity. This has been crucial in enabling them to work with national museums and create more equal partnerships.

  - *Strategic Commissioning* – joint funding from DCSF and DCMS for education projects developed by partnerships of national and regional museums – has enabled the development of sustainable and innovative partnership projects.

- **Cross-border relationships** between the UK home countries, which work alongside schemes serving individual nations and regions.

- Considerable and increasing strength in **working with universities** and other research bodies.

Exhibitions – map of regional museums with which national museums worked on joint exhibitions in 2008-09.

Formal partnerships – map of regional museums with which national museums have formal partnership agreements.

Threats and barriers

Threats and barriers to the future development of partnership working include:

- **Diminishing resources** – reductions in government funding, earned income and grants, and the inevitable resultant reduction in internal capacity, will have a negative impact on partnership working.

- The **absence of a UK-wide museum sector delivery strategy**, which was highlighted in our survey as a barrier to joined-up working.

- **A lack of comprehensive data collection** on partnership activity, and a consequent underestimation of relationships between national and non-national museums.

Recommendations

These recommendations were developed following consideration of research findings and discussion with the project advisory group, which included national museum partnership leads, regional museum directors, and representatives from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), the Association of Independent Museums (AIM) and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The recommendations focus on national museums, with the support and collaboration of regional museums, museum sector bodies, government and funders.

Building collaborative partnerships

1. National museums will be more explicit about what kind of partnership work they undertake and why, and more open about what they can offer to partner organisations, including greater clarity on their objectives for regional working and details of how to contact them to discuss potential partnership working.

Working strategically

2. National museums will maintain and share knowledge of the regional museum sector context and provision, ensuring they are knowledgeable about activity across the UK. National museums will work with regional museums, regional hubs and sector bodies including AIM, MLA and their home country equivalents, to inform priorities for regional working.

3. National museums will ensure coherence between their regional partnerships and multiple branch sites. Regional branches of national museums will establish themselves as part of their local museum community and work to develop and maintain strong connections in their region.

Sharing knowledge

4. National museums will work with MLA to develop a more effective network of Subject Specialist Networks across the UK. This should include a way to formally measure national museums' contribution to Subject Specialist Networks.

5. National museums will disseminate more widely the findings of collections research and other research work, and ensure research findings are available online.

6. National museums will explore and develop sharing of digital resources and improve signposting between online resources.

Developing best practice

7. National museums will share more widely any evaluation of partnership activity and examples of best practice, to contribute to the development of partnership working across the sector.

Making lending easier

8. National museums will ensure greater transparency of their loan procedures to ensure clarity amongst potential lenders. National museums will work with the wider sector, including regional museums, MLA, DCMS, and their home country equivalents, to investigate and remove barriers to lending.

Staff development

9. National museums will work with regional partners to develop the skills, knowledge and expertise of staff within the sector, including staff working in all areas of museum and gallery operation and management.

Joint advocacy

10. National museums will work with regional partners to maximise the mutual benefits of their relationship including joint learning, adding value, ensuring value for money and maximising the advocacy opportunities for the respective partners and the sector as a whole.

Recording partnership activity

11. National museums will agree a consistent set of data on partnership activity to be collected by all. This should be developed in discussion with other sector bodies such as HLF, MLA, DCMS and their home country equivalents to ensure consistency and comparability of data collected across the sector.