

**North West Meeting
The Manchester Museum
12th October 2006**

Present:

Manchester
Henry McGhie
Malcolm Chapman
David Gelsthorpe
Suzanne Grieve
Rebecca Smith
Susan Bulleid

NW Hub
Emma Anderson

World Museum Liverpool
Steve Judd

Towneley Museum
Dave Anderson

Lancs Wildlife Trust
Tim Mitcham

Bolton
Don Stenhouse

Warrington
Colin Taylor

MLANW
Catriona West

The group discussions were prefaced by short presentations from Catriona West and Malcolm Chapman. Catriona's presentation ran through the MLA report 'Collections for the Future' (CFTF) and the ways in which SSN groups could feed into this document. SSN groups are likely to be an important element of delivering CFTF in the three strands of: better engagement between audiences and museums, building dynamic collections and strengthening the sectorial infrastructure.

Malcolm's presentation gave examples on how the Manchester Museum is using CFTF as a kind of manifesto for the development of policies and procedures, building collections and engaging with audiences. The work of separate groups of people in the museum, which has maintained the barriers between 'collections care' and 'access', are being planned together so that documentation is planned strategically. Once a 'broad brush' approach has covered the entire collection, more specific documentation will focus on groups of objects based around the use of those objects, whether for display and public use or for research (and preferably all three). It is anticipated that this approach will continue.

Following these two presentations, we broke into groups to discuss the principles of an SSN in more detail. The outcomes of this discussion have been summarized below.

It was noted that the invitation to attend had gone out to sixteen museums, two affiliated organisations and five environmental agencies and NGOs. It was attended by people from five museums, both affiliated organisations and one environmental agency. Representation does not take into account the large number of individuals who were not present. This could be interpreted as meaning either that an SSN is not needed or alternatively (and much more likely) that an SSN is urgently needed.

What could a network do and what would the outcomes be?

Should be:

- Add demonstrable value to the sector
- Have users and museums as equal partners
- Strengthen partnerships between museums and non-museums, such as the Wildlife Trusts, other conservation bodies, local authorities, County Recorders etc.

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Henry McGhie, October 2006

- About sharing expertise
- Have an up to date list of contacts
- Be informal
- Be based around trust and exchange
- A resource that helps to develop schools' use of museums
- Be a quick way into the sector, particularly for new starters
- Help users to access specialists and expertise
- Aimed at breaking down barriers, particularly between museums and non-museum agencies/organisations **nb. a helpful comparison here was with Portable Antiquities Scheme, which bridges two distinct agency types**
- 'Joined-up' thinking- feed into existing days/weeks/initiatives- eg. World Environment Day, Manchester's 100 days campaign, Big Birdwatch events, Springwatch, etc. Connect to local and global issues
- Linked with regional agendas- engagement with NWDA tourism agenda would draw down money eventually if could demonstrate impact
- Definitely should be about marketing and advocacy- profile raising, all about the communication of ideas, knowledge and experiences, both into and out of museums
- Actively exploring use- what do use, good practice and consultation mean in these terms? What do people want? How much of this has already been investigated?

Should not be:

- All talk and no action
- Time consuming
- Endless meetings
- Bureaucratic/form-filling
- 'Something else' to do- it should empower people to do their existing jobs in a more user-focussed way. The SSN should support institutional workplans rather than be obstructive to them

Some felt that museum policy has become too heavily driven towards humanities subjects and that collections had been lost to science due to ethical standpoints. This view was not held universally however.

What could an SSN do?

Thinking about the strands of CFTF- user participation, dynamic collections and sectorial infrastructure, we came up with the following ideas:

To develop a 'joined-up' web resource that linked different activities, eg. could run through BBC Breathing Places or a website such as the Manchester Portal- build up stories about people, landscape, identity, that allow people to access expertise by emailing staff or by developing blogs. This feeds into KS2-3 in particular and could be used to address the problematic teaching of Citizenship. Promote collections (information held in Fenscore) in this.

Another could be a web resource, again linked to either Breathing Places or BBC Nature that has the following:

Your Region

What's on this month:

- **Nature reserves**
- **Countryside**
- **Museums**

What's in your region:

- **Nature reserves**
- **Natural history museums**
- **Local societies**
- **Ask an expert**

A skills and expertise map was seen as a top priority- not just within museums but in relation to related agencies and organisations. What are our main objectives? What are our key projects? How can we aid each other most sensibly? What are the objectives of pre-identified stakeholders? Who are these?

An SSN could have benefits in devising regional strategy for engaging visitors and users, offering paths of progression between institutions rather than working in isolation. It would then be more likely to draw money down from Regional Development Agencies such as the NWDA (for the NW) to further develop the network and its activities.

It could offer improved access to knowledge, collections and user participation by being better networked with the media (BBC, Channel M in Manchester). It could market regional/national public events.

How would it do it?

It would be crucial that any SSN was sustainable. It would need to match into existing work programmes, at least for the duration of Renaissance funding, rather than create significant additional work. The SSN should tie disparate elements together rather than create new ones.

A key question was as to how the SSN would relate to MLA, GCG, NatSCA, MA, Hub? As it would be funded by MLA, it would most sensibly run through either the Hubs or MLA regional offices.

Barriers to an effective SSN

Poor networking- it was apparent from discussions that there are a number of existing initiatives that are not currently effective. The SAGE skills audit of the NW has gone quiet. Does this need to be reinvigorated? Who by?

Some noted barriers:

- Bureaucracy
- Physical separation
- Communication overload is already an issue for many people- what is important to them and why?
- Time
- There is currently a very unclear vision for the SSN (as taken from the briefing document)
- Staff changes- issues of links established on a personal basis becoming more institutional so that they don't break down with staff changes
- Lack of history of personal and working relationships, both within and between institutions
- Lack of common ground both within and between museums and non-museums
- Lack of knowledge of differing priorities and stakeholders
- Lack of resources- good practice exists but is not disseminated, usually as a lack of human and financial resources
- Lack of lead person/people to drive change if the SSN remains within museums
- Different timeframes for activities: media often work on very short lead-ins. This makes it difficult to plan activities to fit in with BBC programming, for example

| Barriers | Solutions |
|--|---|
| Small museums and nationals have different working environments | Sharing resources fairly |
| Time | Prioritizing; sharing responsibility; not all enquiries will require as much time – some may be forwarded to amateurs etc |
| Shared exhibits etc – practical constraints in varied venues | Reinvigorate touring exhibitions |
| Funding (e.g. transport – why didn't people come today?) | Natural history is popular; relatively easy to promote and justify |
| Lacking specialists – an SSN needs these; 'Decline of curator'; possible decline in volunteers | Promoting natural history; mentoring students; raising awareness in local societies etc |
| Problems in sharing of information | Website contacts; sharing good practice |
| Engaging external partners | Mutual promotion |

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| Organizing meetings involving partners with different working hours etc | Mutually convenient, small working groups |
| Money and time to research links | Worth the effort to network and meet people |
| Competition between organisations, rather than cooperation | Organisations should be more open and accessible. Co-operation to be a recognized performance indicator to report back to stakeholders and funders |

We should develop the following as a matter of urgency:

Contact list

List of specialist expertise and collections strengths- perhaps using Cornucopia

List of likely non-museum partners, such as Wildlife Trusts, English Nature etc.

Develop joint visitor strategy for Hub region

Find out what information has already been gathered

Market other museums and non-museums events and activities- perhaps use Creative Concern and media

Obtain money to set this up- go for implementation grant. Who is going to do it?

Set up a website (as MEG have done) but perhaps through BBC or suchlike

Maintain momentum. Action not talk!