

NMDC response to the Call for Evidence for the House of Lords Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence

This submission is made by the National Museum Directors' Council (NMDC). The NMDC represents the Directors of the UK's national and leading regional museums and collections. For a full list of NMDC's members, please see www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/members.

1 Summary

NMDC welcomes the House of Lords review of soft power and the UK's influence overseas, and is keen to take the opportunity of the Committee's Call for Evidence to provide Lords with information about the contribution made by the UK's national and larger regional museums.

The international work of the UK's national and leading regional museums and collections contributes to the UK's soft power ability and influence overseas. It creates channels of communication, a positive impression and the conveying of different perspectives which may not be achieved through more conventional forms of diplomacy. The position of UK museums as working at arms-length from the Government allows them to create mutually beneficial relationships and build trust based on commonalities between institutions rather than them being viewed as a centrally-controlled arm of Government.

International activity can take many forms, and many of the UK's larger museums have long-held international links derived from the focus of their collections, their expertise, their audience or location. Loans, academic study, acquisitions, peer support, special exhibitions, research, staff exchanges and maintenance of the permanent galleries all provide the means by which international links develop. Although there will be periods when the partnerships focus on high profile projects, the relationships are sustained by ongoing less publicly visible activity.

However, museums find it challenging to embark on this sort of valuable work without seed funding, and the impact of recent public funding cuts mean that there are both fewer sources of external funding and less core funding which can be used for this purpose. The Government should consider building on the excellent work of the World Collections Programme and Stories of the World by making funding available to broker the international work of national and leading regional museums in support of the GREAT campaign. Furthermore, the visa regime can sometimes prove restrictive as museums seek to invite leading artists, curators, research and administrators to visit and work with their institutions.

2 Soft Power

Soft power is the influence achieved through activities which are not formally organized by Government. These activities are those where there are likely to be more immediate purposes, such as the organisation and delivery of a major sporting or cultural event. Exercising soft power is to work with a larger audience and seek attitudinal change over a longer period of time. Genuinely collaborative and independent cultural activity makes a significant contribution to a nation's soft power, as does tourism and science. Soft power is also the result of long-term sustained engagement, although relationships may include periods of very high profile activity.

The healthy and vibrant relationship between UK museums and their Russian counterparts demonstrates the ability of museums to be able to good working relationships when more

formal channels of communication face greater challenges. There is a long-standing relationship between Russian museums and their UK counterparts and the basis of this is derived from the similarities between collections. 2014 will see the UK/Russia Year of Culture, which is being organized by the British Council. The highlight of this will be the major *Cosmonauts* exhibition at the Science Museum, which is only possible because of the large number of partnerships the museum has been able to develop with Russian organisations including the Museum of Cosmonautics (Moscow), Polytechnic Museum (Moscow), Moscow Aviation Institute, Roscosmos, Russian Ministry of Culture, British Embassy and British Council Russia.

Cosmonauts is just one of a number of reciprocal exhibitions that have entertained and informed audiences in the UK and Russia recently. Royal Museums Greenwich also worked with British Council Russia and Roscosmos to relocate the statue of Yuri Gagarin to the Royal Observatory; the National Portrait Gallery's *Man Ray* exhibition (which also featured works from the National Galleries of Scotland collection) will tour to the Pushkin Museum in 2013; Tate's touring exhibition *Pre-Raphaelites*, including loans from Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery (9 artworks), Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums and Manchester City Gallery, also toured to the State Pushkin Museum, Moscow; the National Museums Scotland exhibition *Arctic Convoys* at the National War Museum included a number of loans from Russian collections; and the Museum of London has an MoU with the Moscow City Museum. The V&A's partnership with the Kremlin Museums has seen *The Magnificence of the Tsars* and *Treasures of the Royal Courts* come to London, and the 2010 exhibition *Diaghilev: The Golden Age of the Ballet Russes* led to a new relationship with the Ekaterina Foundation. To illustrate the reciprocal nature of cultural agreements, the V&A toured two exhibitions to Moscow in 2008 and 2011 respectively: *Two Centuries of British Fashion* and *Decode*.

The V&A has long-standing relationships with academics, curators, museums, art galleries and heritage bodies across China. These relationships have developed from work on their Asian collections and have been sustained by academic collaboration and staff exchange. This basis of trust and understanding has formed the bedrock from which higher profile projects have then developed. These have included the 2008 *China Now* exhibition at the V&A, several touring exhibitions (such as *Olympic Posters*) to venues in China, a joint British Museum/V&A/National Museum of China porcelain exhibition in Beijing in 2012 as part of the UK Now season and, most recently, the V&A *Splendours* exhibition at the Palace Museum. This latter exhibition demonstrated the value of the V&A's long-term engagement in China (and similarly India) when it provided the opportunity to bring together Chinese officials and the Indian and UK Ambassadors to China. Furthermore, the level of trust and recognition of the V&A in China is now such that it was able to host the People-to-People dialogue in 2012 and they are now regularly approached by Chinese museum developer for advice, guidance and consultancy services (which are offered on a commercial basis).

Science is an important part of soft power. The Natural History Museum employs 300 scientists and is one of the world's leading research institutions. Their collection, including the vast reference collection, enables them to develop relationships with universities, research institutions, museums and government bodies across the world as they work on research which allows for better understanding of the natural world and human interaction with it. Examples include the study of biodiversity in Borneo pests and insect-borne diseases using specimens of the Brazilian blood-sucking blackfly. Similarly, National Museum Wales has led the study of Molluscan Biodiversity in East Africa, whilst the Wallace Collection has been part of an international research project studying the metallurgy of steel using their Asian arms collection.

3 International Development

There is a role for culture, and museums in particular, in international development. Although the recognition of the role of culture in the development of major bilateral partnerships with rapidly growing economies and new tourism markets has been recognized by the UK

Government and reflected in their political and diplomatic support for specific activities and the inclusion of museum directors in ministerial delegations, the role of culture in international development is not acknowledged to the same extent. Nevertheless, the impact of such activity is remarkable as it is another method of demonstrating soft power.

One area of UK Government which has supported international development via museum activity is the Scottish Executive via their provision of funding for collaborative activity between National Museums Scotland and the National Museum of Malawi. Malawi is the Scottish Government's priority country for international development and consequently supports a wide range of collaborative activity. The museums programme, called *Museums As Agents of Change*, initially focused on bicentenary of the birth of David Livingstone and developed from National Museums Scotland's desire to mark this with an exhibition, *David Livingstone, I presume?* However, the project developed into something much wider and mutually beneficial than a loan agreement to borrow objects from Malawi and now includes ongoing staff exchange, a reciprocal exhibition about David Livingstone in Malawi, research by National Museums Scotland with source communities and the provision of museums skills training for staff in Malawi (including of scarce skills such as taxidermy). Museums are consequently a central part of the international development work of the Scottish Executive, and could provide a model for DFID to consider in England.

Some national museums have undertaken work which should be considered as international development, although this becomes increasingly difficult with cuts to core funding which may have previously covered some of the initial costs. Where third parties have helped broker this work museums have been able to play a significant role. The V&A worked in partnership with British Council Libya to mount the first exhibition in Benghazi since the revolution in April 2012. The exhibition, *Street Art from the V&A and Libya* featured works by Libyan street artists as well as works from the V&A collection by internationally re-known street artists such as Banksy. Exploring the visual language and techniques of street art, the exhibition also examined the social and political significance that the work holds. As a vibrant visual expression and democratic language, street art in Libya has flourished since the Arab Spring and revolution in 2011. The spontaneity and immediacy of street art has allowed artists to articulate opinions outside the conventional channels of political debate.

Similarly, both the British Museum and British Library used their long-held academic relationships with colleagues in Iraq to maintain contact and support throughout the period of British Army deployment in the country. Very small amounts of funding from DCMS allowed both institutions to provide support in the form of training, advice and equipment. The British Museum continued to develop relationships with archaeologists and museum directors in Iraq and, from 2008 worked closely with the British Army stationed in Basra to conduct archaeological site evaluations and work on the long-term re-development of a museum in Basra as part of the post-conflict regeneration.

4 Impact of digital technology and rapid global change

Soft power is more important in an increasingly digitally connected world. Mass communication is quicker and less centrally controlled than ever before. The proliferation of smartphone technology and social media, and the vast increase in digital content have fundamentally changed the way in which people find out about the world. Museums have embraced this and they now welcome far more visitors online each year than they could ever accommodate if they came over the museum threshold. Major museums' websites provide layers of interpretation for the collection and ways in which the online visitor can engage independently or as a group. The entire National Gallery collection is available to [view online](#), as is a [360 degree tour](#) of 18 of their galleries. Both the V&A and Tate operate their own online channels through their websites, with constantly updated digital output about special exhibitions and the permanent collections. Imperial War Museums (IWM) has recently launched [Lives of the First World War](#), which is an interactive digital platform to bring together material from museums, libraries, archives and family collections from across the world together in one place to build a permanent digital memorial to those who served in

uniform and worked on the home front during the First World War and a means to explore their stories.

Museums have embraced social media and taken this beyond utilizing it for just domestic marketing. The IWM and Royal Museums Greenwich Twitter feeds both have “on this day” features which link to historic stories with a connection to their collections. Museums across the world, including a large number from the UK, sign up to #askacurator day where Twitter users are able to ask questions of curators from over 300 museums in 32 countries.

The way people engage with cultural activity has changed markedly, and so has exposure to different forms of cultural exchange. Audiences are not passive recipients of museum activity, and experiencing the cultural output of another country or culture is no longer the preserve of an elite few. Fuelled by social media, the internet, smartphone technology, rolling news and more accessible international travel, cultural exchange is more immediate than ever before. Areas of the world with rapid economic, social and political change are now familiar and visible to a UK audience, making the UK public more curious about their culture, history and heritage. The reverse is also true – in countries where UK museums have not historically had an audience, UK museums are building partnerships with organisations.

A number of UK museums are developing partnerships with Brazilian organisations and focusing some of their programming on the culture and history of Brazil. In the presence of the Brazilian President, the Science Museum Group signed an agreement to work with the Ministry of Culture in Brazil to provide advice and content for a network of Science Museums in Brazil. Tate has a long-standing partnership with Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo which informs their acquisition of Latin American art, prompts staff exchanges and reciprocal loans including for the forthcoming *Mira Schendel* exhibition at Tate Modern. In 2013, the Horniman Museum in South London hosted a season of Brazilian films and an exhibition, *Amazon Adventure*, about the natural environment of the River Amazon, and the Natural History Museum held a large retrospective of the work of Brazilian landscape. UK museum professionals will travel to Brazil in the Autumn with the British Council as part of a large programme of activity designed to encourage greater collaboration and cultural exchange between Brazil and the UK.

5 The unique position of UK museums: collections and expertise

The objects in museums' collections tell stories about people, places, nature and thought. The stories told by these objects, brought to life by their study and display, help more easily explore common themes and threads through history and relate these to the present day. Some of the most comprehensive and internationally significant collections of natural history, ethnography, social history, technology, art, literature and design are held by UK museums. The stories these museums tell are world stories. Consequently, to maintain their international pre-eminence, national and major regional museums have to maintain high standards of scholarship, collections care, visitor experience and engagement, and display. To do this, these larger museums have to work with their international counterparts.

The recent success of projects such as the Fitzwilliam Museum exhibition *Search for Immortality: Treasures of Han Tombs* (the largest loan of treasures from the Han tombs to a Western institution), Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums' partnership with the Nelson Mandela Bay Museums, and the *We Face Forward* festival of West African art and music at the Whitworth Gallery and Manchester Museum demonstrates that this sort of international activity is now part of the business of leading regional museums as well as very large nationals. Museums loan and borrow thousands of objects every year from institutions overseas. In 2011-12, Tate lent 516 works to 132 venues in 25 countries.

The collections provide the reason to build international networks. Piri Reis University, Istanbul have set up an international association for maritime studies – with 20 founding members from different countries and an agreed constitution. The National Maritime Museum is one of the founding members. Organisers will hold a biennial congress, publish research about

Mediterranean history and set up an online network. Beamish is a member of a European network of open air museum and a number of large national museums are members of the international Bizot Group of major international museums.

Conservation of objects and the sharing of expertise is the life-blood of long-term partnerships between UK museums and institutions with like interests across the world, and because of the diversity and quality of museums' collections the breadth and geographical reach of these partnerships is substantial. The RAF Museum is involved in joint aircraft restoration programmes in New Zealand and Eritrea. The latter is a tripartite project with the Italian Air Force Museum.

Museums with an international collection seek to develop good relationships with source communities to ensure that the objects are handled sensitively and that a body of knowledge is developed about them. Brighton Museums work closely with communities in Myanmar (Burma) and Papua New Guinea, Bristol Museums and Art Gallery is working with Museo Nacional de Antropología on Mexican objects in the Bristol collection, and *Across the Board* is a Tate-wide initiative to deepen their engagement with art in Africa. This will include performances, seminars, conferences and events in London, Lagos, Accra and Douala, and will be supported by acquisitions and two exhibitions in Tate galleries: *Ibrahim El Salahi* and *Meschac Gaba* (all 2013).

6 Impact

Good but less formal relationships developed or sustained through cultural activity can create a positive context within which more formal trade relationships can flourish. The UK has been ranked 3rd in the world for cultural resources by the World Economic Forum. The British Council reports *Trust Pays* and *Culture Means Business* demonstrate the impact of cultural activity, and there are many examples of high profile cultural exchange between museums in countries and regions where more formal channels of communication face greater challenges.

Museums are uniquely able to present objects and exhibitions in a contemplative environment, allowing visitors to explore their own culture, history and identity, as well as that of those they see as "other". The central position of Imperial War Museums in the UK's commemoration of the First World War, and their ability to have encouraged more than 400 UK and international organisations to join their First World War Centenary Partnership, demonstrates this and the trust placed in these institutions.

An important part of UK museums' international work is the impact on the domestic audience as museums seek to be the place to explore the world around them. The involvement of British troops in Afghanistan has made the UK audience more familiar with that country than previously. The British Museum, Tate and the British Library used the World Collections Programme funding to develop public programming for both UK and Afghan audiences which looked at ancient, historic and contemporary Afghanistan and drew links through periods of history. *Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World* at the British Museum in 2010 proved to be very popular as audiences wanted to explore the ancient history of Afghanistan and see the ancient gold treasures protected by museum professionals at the National Museum in Kabul from the Taliban. At the same time, Tate commissioned photographer Simon Norfolk to conduct workshops with young photographers in Afghanistan as they sought to recreate the 19th century photographs taken by John Burke (which are in the collection of the British Library). The resulting exhibition, *Burke + Norfolk*, was mounted in Kabul and at Tate Modern. The third element of the project was a British Library exhibition of the reproductions of the John Burke photographs staged in Kabul and Herat (and visited by thousands of Afghans). That exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue (printed in English, Dari and Pashtu) which was sent to educational establishments in Afghanistan. In each case, the seed funding provided by the World Collections Programme then levered in additional support from various sources including Bank of America, British Embassy in Kabul and the Aga Khan Foundation.

It is also important that museums' international work filters into work in local communities. The National Media Museum in Bradford holds an annual International Film Festival, and in 2013 this coincided with their showcase of *One Hundred Years of Indian Cinema*. The museum works with local Asian communities on public programming for the festival, but also hosts English classes for local Pakistani immigrants.

7 Trust and Reach

Museums' international activity, including extensive programmes of touring exhibitions and partnerships, raise the profile not only of individual museums and collections but the UK as a whole. Research by the British Council demonstrates that international cultural relationships build trust in the UK and are associated with increased levels of interest in visiting the UK as a tourist, studying here or doing business with the UK.ⁱ

The unique position of the UK cultural sector as a trusted broker was illustrated by the Culture Ministers' Summit in 2012. The event, co-organised by the Scottish Executive, DCMS and the Edinburgh International Festival, was an opportunity for culture ministers from across the world to meet and discuss international collaboration against the backdrop of an internationally renowned event. The Summit dinner was held at the National Museum of Scotland and was an opportunity to showcase not just the international work of the museum, but the refurbished building, remarkable collection and provide an opportunity for staff to meet officials from across the world.

Our leading museums work with press agencies around the world to promote their exhibitions. The Natural History Museum's Veolia Environment Wildlife Photographer of the Year Exhibition consistently has a wide international media reach. The 2011/12 campaign attracted approximately 93 articles internationally, in addition to over 200 in the UK. The 2012 exhibition was featured in press articles in Russia, Brazil, USA, China, India and France. A feature on BBC TV World News was broadcast in South East Asia, India, Pakistan, Europe and North and South America, and an interview with the competition winner, Paul Nicklen on BBC World Service Outlook radio programme reached 145 million listeners across the world, sparking particular interest across North America.

The British Museum's collaboration with the BBC on the radio series *A History of the World in 100 Objects* has raised the profile of the museum around the globe. There have been over 30 million international downloads of the programme and the book has been sold in 12 countries including France, Germany, Spain, Russia, China and India. The British Museum estimates that the series brought an additional 266,000 visits to the Museum in 2010.

The British Museum sent 13 exhibitions on tour to 9 countries in 2012 including the USA, China, India and Russia. When the British Museum borrowed high profile objects from Xi'an for the hugely successful *First Emperor* exhibition (2007) and took their touring exhibition *Britain Meets the World* to Beijing in the same year, there was a noticeable increase in visitors to the British Museum from East Asia: there was much greater awareness of the British Museum brand in China.

8 Funding

The World Collections Programme, Stories of the World and specific programmes co-ordinated by the British Council and the London 2012 Festival all show the impact that can be achieved by the national and leading UK museums with comparatively modest seed funding from the public purse. Many of the activities – including *We Face Forward* and *In Search of Immortality* – were part of the Stories of the World programme. Tate's programme in Africa, now supported by Guaranty Bank Trust was initiated using World Collections Programme funding, as was the collective work in Afghanistan, the British Museum International Training Programme (now also independently funded and involving seven regional museums) and the V&A's initial touring exhibition to venues in India, *Life and Landscapes*. An impact of the recent public funding cuts may be that, as the cuts take effect, museums have to be more

selective about the international work they undertake focusing more on less challenging or commercial activity.

The UK Government has invested in the GREAT campaign, and this investment in the positive legacy of the London Olympics is welcome. Nevertheless, the most effective advertisement for British culture is the cultural activity itself and seed-funding the sort of activity which the World Collections Programme and Stories of the World enabled would support the aims of the GREAT campaign.

Museums have to be more selective about their international work, and increasingly rely on external funding to be able to deliver this activity. They may narrow their focus on income generating international work such as commercial touring and consultancy. Whilst the largest national museums, such as the British Museum, may attract private investment in their international activities, it is far more difficult for museums outside of London to raise funds in this way (as recently published statistics from Arts & Business illustrate).

9 Tourism

Museums and galleries are the UK's most popular visitor attractions. There are over 50 million visits a year to national museums alone, and over half of the UK's adult population visited a museum or gallery in 2012. Museums are at the heart of the UK's cultural offer which is frequently cited as the main reason to visit. UK museums lend high profile objects or complete touring exhibitions to venues in all of VisitBritain's top 20 markets for projected growth (2011–2020). The cities where UK museums exhibit, lecture and collaborate with artists are no longer just in their familiar regions of North America and Western Europe, but in Kuala Lumpur and Kobe, Moscow and Mumbai, and Riyadh and Rio de Janeiro. International visits to the UK's leading museums have almost doubled in the past decade. Museums' international touring exhibitions and loans ensure familiarity with those institutions and their collections in both established and growing overseas tourist markets.

Overseas visits to national museums have increased by 95% in the past decade, with over 19 million overseas visits in 2011/12.ⁱⁱ Museums are a key strength for the UK's international brand and a motivator to visit, and are a popular activity for both domestic and international visitors.ⁱⁱⁱ The Natural History Museum recorded a 234,000 increase in overseas visits in 2011/12, compared to 2010/11. The museum has seen a significant rise in international visitors over the past 5 years. The largest growth in numbers has come from Europe but it is clear new markets are also opening up. Visitors from Africa, Asia, South and Central America increased from 6% of overseas visits in 2010/11 to 11% in 2011/12. This trend is not just restricted to London. The Wordsworth Trust, which runs Dove Cottage in Grasmere, makes special provision for Japanese visitors and overseas visitors accounted for 25% of their visitors between April and July 2013.

USA, Commonwealth and the EU

The commonalities of history, collections and language can make it easier to establish relationships with institutions within the Commonwealth. UK museums relationships with Indian institutions have been eased by some of the familiarities of the Commonwealth, and the forthcoming commemoration of the First World War has shown that the common understanding of networks like the Commonwealth and the EU allows for a less polarized study of history. Bristol Museums and Art Gallery is using the Commonwealth as the basis for a major exhibition in 2014, *Global Conflict*, and in doing so are building relationships with organisations for loans and research.

The European Union creates a helpful structure within which to engage internationally, provide funding and some common understanding. The visa regime between members of the EU also helps to deliver museum activity, and is in contrast with the difficulties some museums face in securing visas and work permits for the overseas visitors, artists, curators and staff required to run pre-eminent institutions. The challenges that the visa regime presents is one barrier to museums being able to engage in some international activity.

The area with which there is greatest exchange between museums is the United States, and this is likely to be driven by similar histories and collections, a common language and the familiarity with each museum sector.

Universities

UK museums work closely with UK universities and there are hundreds of research and teaching partnerships in place. Many of these have international dimensions. City museums which are located close to a university tend to develop good relationships, such as that which exists between the Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Exeter University. University museums are able to seek the benefits of the wider international relationships their parent body develops whilst also maintaining some of the UK's leading collections. Universities are also sometimes the most appropriate partner for major research projects. Royal Museums Greenwich is working with the University of Cambridge on a 5-year joint AHRC-funded research project on Longitude. Whilst the main partners are UK based, this project is of global significance. One outcome of the partnership has been a fully digitised archive of the Board of Longitude papers and wider collections material. This information is now [electronically available](#) for the benefit of scholars and researchers across the world.

Devolved Administrations

It would be helpful if there was a more co-ordinated or joined-up approach with the devolved administrations. It is important to be able to maintain different but complementary narratives for Scotland, Wales, NI and England. That diversity is one of the attractions of the UK and would assist Government moves to encourage investment and tourism beyond London.

ⁱ *Trust Pays: how International cultural relationships build trust in the UK and underpin the success of the UK economy*, British Council, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Visitors from overseas made over 18.7m visits to the 17 museums sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in 2011-12. Overseas visits to these museums have increased by 95% over the past decade, from 9.6m in 2001-2. Overseas visitors also make a significant number of visits to our national museums in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and to those sponsored by the Ministry of Defence.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Culture and Heritage Topic Profile*, VisitBritain, 2010