

NMDC response to House of Lords Select Committee Inquiry 'UK foreign policy in changed world conditions'

February 2018

1. The National Museum Directors' Council (NMDC) represents the leaders of the UK's national collections and major regional museums. Our members are the national and major regional museums in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, the British Library, the National Library of Scotland, the National Archives and Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. NMDC acts as an advocate on behalf of members and their collective priorities and provides them with a valuable forum for discussion and debate and an opportunity to share information and work collaboratively. While our members are funded by government, the NMDC is an independent, non-governmental organisation. For more information about NMDC and our activity see our website: www.nationalmuseums.org.uk
2. NMDC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Lords International Relations Select Committee Call for Evidence on 'UK foreign policy in changed world conditions'. The following response does not speak to each question individually but highlights the contribution museums make to cultural diplomacy and the successful approach taken in developing international relations. It draws on [evidence provided by NMDC](#)¹ to DCMS for its review of museums in 2016/17.
3. The UK museums sector is internationally renowned and respected. The international work of museums makes a major contribution to the UK's soft power capability and influence overseas. It creates channels of communication, a positive impression of the UK and the conveying of different perspectives which may not be achieved through more conventional forms of diplomacy. The soft power of museums has never been more important as the UK seeks to manage the impacts of leaving the EU.
4. The position of UK museums as working at arms-length from government allows them to create mutually beneficial relationships and build trust based on institutions' shared interests. International working is no longer the preserve of just the very large national museums, but museums of all scope and sizes across the UK are developing their international partnerships.
5. As the recent ResPublica report on 'Britain's Global Future'² notes: "many of the cultural institutions of British soft power are widely considered to be leaders in their field. International models of conservation in art, artefacts and heritage sites are

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https://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/responses_position_statements/museums_review_call_for_evidence.pdf

² <http://www.respublica.org.uk/our-work/publications/britains-global-future-harnessing-soft-power-capital-uk-institutions/>

pioneered by museums such as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Kew Gardens has one of the largest herbariums in the world, and uses its collection of plant specimens to enable international scientific research on the environment, agriculture and climate change. The Science Museum Group is recognised as a leader in informal STEM learning."

6. As the report also notes, "British culture becomes an important factor in diplomatic relations and conflict resolution, as it enables the United Kingdom to maintain ties with countries even when political relations are strained". For example the Science Museum's Cosmonauts exhibition, a collaboration with numerous Russian partners, was a staggering success and a mechanism for continued diplomatic relations even when UK–Russia relations were declining. The Respublica report also stresses the importance and vital role of the British Council and BBC World Service as agents of British soft power abroad when they are properly funded and supported.
7. Major museums not only provide a reason to visit the UK, but they also represent the UK as a significant part of 'UK plc'. Excellent yet less formal relationships developed through cultural activity can help to create positive context within which more formal economic and trade relationships can flourish. The international work of museums is a crucial part of bilateral relationships with the UK, as they are major tourist attractions and provide an attractive context for the development of trade and business.
8. Touring exhibitions and loans form a significant and visible part of museums' international work, but it is supported by skills sharing, community programmes, research, digital engagement, conservation, audience development and fieldwork. Museums work internationally to maintain their relevance in a globalised world, learn more about their collections, and to provide high quality public programming for a global audience that has the means to be more curious about the world.
9. It should be noted that the exit from the EU is leading to some uncertainty about the future of international partnerships. Although museums' relationships with European partners are based on the commonalities of collections and expertise and many exist outside of the European Union structure, there are concerns over the future of funding, exclusion from networks and challenges associated with changes to the free movement of people and objects.
10. To ensure the Government has the skills and capacity to thrive in this new global environment, it should use the good example set by our national institutions and their outward facing approach. DCMS should continue to champion the role of good cultural relations in supporting diplomacy, trade and tourism across Government, and work with FCO, DFID, CLG and others to champion the international work of museums at both national and regional level. The Department should continue to seek opportunities to embed culture into wider bilateral relationships wherever possible, and encourage the same regionally.

In case of any queries regarding this response or if you require any further information please contact Kathryn Simpson, Policy and Projects Manager, National Museum Directors' Council: kathryn.simpson@nationalmuseums.org.uk / 020 7942 4076.