

NIMC Peer Learning Forum ‘Spilling the Beans on Caring for Collections’

Museum of Orange Heritage on 20 March 2019

Presentations and case studies

Session 1: New spaces for collections

- ‘Moving Collections, Representation, and Preventative Conservation’ - David Orr, Conservator, Hillsborough Castle
- ‘New Storage Facilities - Challenges and Opportunities’ – Roisin Doherty, Curator, Derry city and Strabane Museum and Visitor Service
- ‘Planning and Delivering on a Museum Revamp’ - Noreen Cunningham, Curator, Newry and Mourne Museum

Session 2: Engaging the Public with Collections Care

- ‘Artificial Sunshine: Engaging the Public with the Conservation of an Historic Light Fitting at The Argory’ - Claire Magill, Regional Conservator, National Trust
- ‘Save an 80s Class Train: Crowdfunding and Social Media Campaign to raise funds for Restoration’ - Robert Gardiner, Chairman, Downpatrick and County Down Railway,
- ‘Collections Care, Conservation and the Public’ - Susie Bioletti, Chair of ICRI and Head of Preservation and Conservation at Trinity College, Dublin.

Session 3: Assessing Collections Needs

- ‘Collections Care in partnership with the Pilgrim Trust and ICON: An overview of AIM’s funding programmes’ - Emma Chaplin, Director of Association of Independent Museums.
- ‘Secrets in the Attic: An assessment of Mid and East Antrim Museum Collection Stores’ - Jayne Clarke and Elaine Hill, Mid-Antrim Museum.
- ‘Springhill Costume Collection Review’ - Catherine Byrne, Registrar at National Trust

Group Discussions

1) What is the major challenge in relation to caring for collections at your museum today?

1. STORAGE- 15
 - Legacy material not appropriate to Collections Development Policy
 - Outgrowing capacity was the most cited issue in relation to storage
 - Management arrangements – sharing spaces
 - Appropriate environmental conditions
2. SECURITY AND RISK ASSESSMENT – 7

- Disaster planning and implementing security recommendations
3. MUSEUM ENVIRONMENT- 4
 - High tech systems requires expertise not available onsite
 - Non-local suppliers are hard to reach
 - Expensive systems needed
 4. HOUSEKEEPING- 3
 5. DISPLAY- 2
 6. CONSERVATION- 2
 - Small pool of local conservators and conservators from outside NI reluctant to bid for work here (travel expensive for them)
 - Councils procurement can be off putting for conservators
 - Conservators are reluctant to carry out conservation work in which another conservator has condition assessed and proposed a conservation treatment – as methodologies differ.

Time, staff and budget resources were also highlighted in relation to all of the above.

Collections roles are becoming rarer, with staff now expected to cover many roles from collections, education and outreach to management. This lack of collections focussed roles is an issue at local authority and independent museums however not as much an issues at National Trust as their new restructure saw a focus on collections roles and this has been welcomed.

2) What will be the major challenges and opportunities for collections care in 10 years?

Challenges for the future

- Storage capacity not allowing for growth of collections
- Less expertise and collections focused roles in the sector
- Funding for conservation and collections care
- Technology
- Volunteer management
- Staffing structures continually changing – lack of continuity with staff in more temporary positions

Opportunities for the future

- Centralised/shared stores – allowing smaller and bigger museums to share space in same Council areas
- Commercial ventures to pay for collections
- More opportunities for environmentally sustainable buildings will provide better environmental conditions

Noted as both challenges and opportunities were: public access to stores, green credentials, and digitisation of collection.

3) How can NIMC support the museum sector in the area of caring for collections?

- Forums/peer learning discussions
- Promoting case studies - Share learning and best practice
- Funding
- Advice and guidance
- Support/ encourage collaboration
- Signposting
- Toolkits
- Strategic intervention- Broker between experts, funders, other strategic stakeholders and museums- Planning and implementing coordinated work
- Advocacy

Other notes

Certainly storage was the central issue discussed during the day, in particular the fact that museum stores have reached their capacity and museums need more space for storage. There was wide interest in hearing more about case studies where centralised and shared storage was working well. The need to rationalise collections was also a topic which gained much interest and understanding best practice in relation to it. 3 out of the 4 ideas given by participants on future Spilling the Beans topics mentioned 'Rationalisation'. The other suggestion was specific training on conservation- i.e. books and paper, wooden items.

Potential case studies to look into:

- Susie Bioletti, Trinity College mentioned that they share storage with another two archival institutions.
- Emma Chaplin, AIM said that she has worked on a number of rationalisation projects in the past.
- Elaine Hill mentioned that Museum East have developed a rationalisation methodology.