

## FACTSHEET 7: EXHIBITION STANDARD

**THIS FACTSHEET RELATES TO QUESTION 5.1, 5.3 AND 5.4 OF THE MSPI (MUSEUM STANDARDS PROGRAMME FOR IRELAND)**

This Factsheet is intended to offer enhanced guidance on the Exhibition standards [5.1-5.4], and in particular to offer greater clarity on Consistent Approach to Labelling [5.1], Visitor Survey and Evaluation of Exhibitions [5.3] and Exhibition Policy [5.4].

### 1. Why exhibitions are critical to the success of a museum and how they fit into the overall mission

Given that the mission of any museum revolves around the care and display of its collections, it is clear that the exhibition space - its style, content and layout - is the prime means by which the museum communicates with its visitors. A museum standards process, therefore, must inevitably have some regard for the main interface between the museum and its public. Yet it is not a straightforward task. The easiest standards to adjudicate are those that measure the measurable. But exhibitions are an area where qualitative values prevail: imagination, humour and quirkiness can be among the hallmarks of an excellent exhibition, but these qualities are not easy to define, let alone measure. Each successful exhibition will differ from others because it will have tried to articulate what is unique (and often idiosyncratic) about its own collection, or the story it has to tell. There is no one size that fits all.

### 2. Exhibitions and standards

Nevertheless, exhibitions do have some measurable features that are indicative of a museum's pride in its work and commitment to communicating with its audience. Poorly maintained, badly lit, and seldom changed exhibitions, malfunctioning audio-visual equipment, impossible-to-read text and poor access for the disabled, are seldom found in the well-managed museum, but often found in a poorly-run one.

Good exhibitions do not exist in isolation: they are rooted in the organisational culture of the museum - specifically in the sense of mission and quality of strategic thinking that museum leaders and staff bring to bear on their work. So the first task of the Exhibition Standards in MSPI is to check that a museum's mission, strategy and ability to interpret its own collections are aligned. There will be a discernible relationship between the museum's sense of its core identity and *mission*, the logic of its *collection policy* and the quality of its *interpretative planning* that will be manifest in its exhibitions.

The second exercise is to measure what is measurable, that is to check whether the exhibition space is sufficiently resourced and meets an acceptable standard of basic housekeeping.

- Are the space, display cases and contents regularly cleaned?
- Is there evidence that things which break down or fall into disrepair are being fixed promptly?
- Is there evidence of active change or re-arrangement of the contents?
- Are all of these processes supported by routine maintenance and dedicated exhibition budgets?

### 3. Consistent approach to text and language-based museum content

Prior to the advent of modern (and increasingly cheaper) audio-visual media, the predominant way of conveying the meaning of museum objects was by labels and graphic stills (photographs, wall or board-mounted illustrations etc.). However, text still remains the cheapest and one of the most effective ways of providing visitors with information. Consistency of approach to the amount of words used in both graphic

panels and text labels is still critical to providing the visitor with an intellectually and psychologically coherent experience. There are no hard and fast rules about the number of words to be used in any one context, but *conciseness* is an obvious goal. Thus the *Manual of Museum Exhibitions* (B. Lord and G.D. Lord, 2002, 398-99) has recommendations for the number of words in the main title (6-8 words) and explanatory content (60-80 words). It also provides indicative font sizes (14-18 point). In the design process, it is always feasible to vary these parameters - but the main requirement for MSPI standards will be *consistency*.

In principle, consistency should extend to cover all text content of an exhibition, including that presented in multi-media. Text appearing on monitors and interactive displays should show a similar concern for conciseness. The temptation to load - or more often overload - such media with information should be resisted.

An alternative to text-based content is sound or voice-based content. The use of multi-media should be seen as an opportunity to add variety, entertainment value and educational effectiveness to an exhibition's content. Once again, conciseness is a standard: a narrator droning on about a subject audibly is no less taxing of a visitor's interest and attention than large expanses of text.

The deployment of all media should be centred on the visitor experience. For example, loud sound installations can be a form of noise pollution that may prove distracting or irritating to a visitor's enjoyment of other aspects of the experience. Your exhibition survey should check to see whether you are getting the balance right.

We should not forget also that human mediation (a tour of the exhibition space by an informed guide or attendant) is one of the most effective forms of communication. But this should be carefully planned to ensure that an exhibition is sufficiently self-explanatory to give the visitor a rewarding experience when a guide is not available.

#### **4. Communication and effective feedback - the importance of visitor surveys**

There is really only one way to check whether a museum's efforts to communicate with its visitors through the medium of its exhibitions have been successful: ask them. Finding out whether an exhibition's message has been received, understood and enjoyed is essential to changing existing displays and planning future exhibitions effectively. Hence the importance of a survey process focused specifically on the effectiveness of exhibitions.

#### **5. The difference between an exhibition survey and a general visitor survey**

In the MSPI standards, the surveying of visitors is split between an exhibition survey (5.3) and a general visitor survey (7.7 and 7.8). It is important to understand the different objectives of these two standards. The purpose of the exhibition survey is to find out whether the museum's core offering is effective, and if not to use the feedback to redesign or realign its contents to ensure a better result. It can also be used to guide exhibition planning more broadly, for example in devising a more effective programme of temporary exhibitions.

The general visitor survey is designed to assess visitors' level of satisfaction with all aspects of the museum experience, which includes such information as how they found out about the museum, whether signposting was effective, the welcome warm, the toilets clean, the cakes in the restaurant delicious, the contents of the bookshop worth buying, and so on. Almost all of this information feeds logically into the museum's marketing strategy.

## 6. The problem with 'permanent' exhibitions

Many of the MSPI standards are designed to ensure that the museum is capable of taking permanent care of its collections, but permanence is not a desirable quality of museum exhibitions. Yet it is striking how easily museum staff can slip into referring to the 'permanent exhibition'. What this often really means is that the main exhibition cost a fortune to produce and is therefore forbiddingly expensive to change, or that permanence is a symptom of a wider inertia. All museums, regardless of scale, should be thinking about and implementing some kind of change in their exhibition offerings. Preferably, all museums should have a *temporary* exhibitions programme, reviewed on an annual basis. But even resource-strapped museums should seek to change the contents of their main exhibition periodically, if only to exchange some objects on display with some from the collection. Rotating objects between collection and display is a relatively low cost operation for even the most poorly-funded museum, and is at least an indicator of some desire to show off as much as possible of the collection and provide variety for its visitors.

## 7. The questions that matter for your survey

Rather than providing a rigid template for an exhibition survey here, it might be more useful to suggest some of the key questions that might be asked, leaving some flexibility and discretion for each museum to design its own questionnaire format. There is no need for the questions to be the same on each occasion, and in some cases they can be quite specific. For example, you might like to know whether a specific audio-visual installation added since the previous survey has contributed positively to the visitor experience. But here are some questions that might be included in any survey:

- Did you find the story told through this exhibition interesting and engaging? [effective communication]
- Was the story clearly told, or confusing? [effective communication]
- Did you find it easy to find your way around it? [effective signposting, orientation, navigation]
- What aspect of it did you find most memorable or enjoyable? [impact]
- Was enough information provided to help you understand the objects and the story they have to tell? [effective communication]
- Is there too much, too little, or just the right amount of text? [effective communication]
- Are we getting the balance right between graphics, audio-visual media and object right in the overall presentation? [effective design and communication]
- If there was one thing we could do to make it a better exhibition, what would it be? [identifying weaknesses, planning for improvement]

## 8. Exhibition Policy

So, what is an exhibition policy? It is essentially the clear expression of the museum's sense of how it uses the multi-media language of display to communicate effectively and engagingly with its audience. It is the product of:

- (a) a sense of the museum's identity and mission, based on a clear sense of the unique qualities of its collection
- (b) a collections policy that ensures the collection's contents are aligned coherently with that mission
- (c) a process of exhibition planning, based on visitor feedback, that informs changes and improvements to the main exhibition and the programming of temporary exhibitions.

Therefore, writing an exhibition policy should be informed by other MSPI standards. The ones to pay particular attention to are: Mission Statement [1.1]; Collection Policy [1.5]; Education Policy [6.6]; relevant sections of the Strategic Management Plan [2.3] and Financial Plan [2.6].