

## **National Access and Learning Strategy and Action Plan for Museums and Galleries in Scotland**

### **Consultation response from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities**

As the representative body of the Jewish community in Scotland, we welcome the SMC's National Access and Learning Strategy and Action Plan for its commitment to inclusion, community involvement and lifelong learning. We do, however, have some concern about the SMC's intention to 'shape identity' (vision statement p4), and would strongly suggest that it is for communities and individuals to shape their own identity whilst the role of the SMC is to encourage understanding and appreciation of those identities.

#### **Accessibility**

We agree that accessibility should be considered in its widest sense, and should include not only physical access, but also whether people feel that they will be accepted and welcomed. We would recommend that the SMC should provide museum staff with training and information about matters of concern to particular groups, as is already the case in other public services such as education and health. For example, holding some kinds of events on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, excludes observant Jewish people from taking part, and where refreshments are provided the absence of kosher food may lead observant Jewish people to feel excluded. When planning museums, care should be taken to ensure that access is possible without using automatic doors or electronic barriers, as observant Jews will not operate such devices on the Sabbath. Since the Sabbath is a day of rest, this is when observant Jews are most likely to wish to visit a museum, but it should be noted that entrance fees would prevent them doing so, as they will not handle money on the Sabbath.

We appreciate that many people will benefit if more museum collections and educational material are made available online, and we support this objective. We would, however, caution that this will not resolve all problems, since not everyone has access to a computer, something which may be particularly true of some of the groups least likely to visit museums.

#### **Identifying and engaging with people at risk of exclusion**

Museums have much to offer to people of all backgrounds, and we regret that neither the strategy nor the action plan suggests a process for 'identifying people at risk of exclusion', identifying their representatives or 'engaging their representatives in dialogue'. These are key to understanding why some groups do not currently visit museums and we recommend that the action plan should set out procedures for achieving them.

It is perhaps significant that only one of the sixteen organisations on the steering group represents a minority community (the Black Environment Network), and of nearly 50 focus group participants there is also only one (the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities) representing a minority community. Several disability organisations are represented, but the majority of the participants represent a variety of museums and cultural organisations. This is no doubt indicative of the difficulties involved in identifying and engaging with the representatives of people at risk of exclusion, and emphasises the need for the action plan to suggest mechanisms for reaching excluded communities rather than simply stating objectives.

#### **Staffing**

We would agree that it is desirable for 'staff, volunteers and boards [to] represent the museum's diverse audiences, recruitment and employment procedures having been informed by equal opportunities policies'. It must, however, be recognised that this is not achievable overnight – nor in all probability by 2007 as suggested in the action plan. It will take considerably longer than three years for new junior staff to achieve any seniority, so an effective policy to recruit directly into senior posts will need to be implemented if there is to be any improvement in the short term.

**Partnership working**

We support the objective of 'enabling, identifying and nurturing local partnerships with diverse communities.....to inform access and learning provision'. Individual communities are best-placed to present their own culture and experience, and we would expect it to be cost-effective for the SMC to support this by means of their expertise as well as through funding.

In the case of the Jewish Community, the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre holds the records and displays of the Jewish Communities of Scotland at its centre in the Garnethill Synagogue in Glasgow. The Centre will co-operate in developing strategies to ensure inclusive practices in its facilities.

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