

RUNNYMEDE



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THE RUNNYMEDE TRUST REPOSE TO  
**Understanding the Future: Priorities for England's Museums**

19 January 2007

We welcome the opportunity provided by this consultation paper to respond to the priorities raised for the future of England's museums.

The Runnymede Trust is an independent policy research organisation focusing on equality and justice through the promotion of a successful multi-ethnic society. Our mandate is to promote a society where citizens and communities feel valued, enjoy equal opportunities to develop their talents, lead fulfilling lives and accept a collective responsibility all in the spirit of civic friendship, shared identity and a common sense of belonging. Cultural policy has thus been an area of concern to us, as it is integral to the recognition, inclusion, identity and belonging of all citizens as well as a driver for increased mutual understanding in and between our diverse communities.

The priorities identified by the Department for Culture, Media and Sports in this consultation paper represent some key points for change that Runnymede has long been advocating in the arts sector. We recognise the importance of setting out a plan of priorities that will affect all of England's museums; especially the priorities to promote diversity and a common sense of belonging. Given our past research projects and expertise we feel we are best placed to comment on the following three out of the five main priority categories:

- museums fulfilling their potential as learning resources for people of all ages;
- building inclusiveness in England's museums through its activities, programmes and framework; and
- promoting greater opportunities in employment and a diverse workforce for England's museums.

In engaging with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's plan for England's museums, we return to the deliberations of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain.<sup>1</sup> The Commission set out to map a strategy on race equality and community cohesion, in its remit,

*To analyse the current state of multi-ethnic Britain and to propose ways of countering racial discrimination and disadvantage and making Britain a confident and vibrant multicultural society at ease with its rich diversity.*

Runnymede therefore supports strategies in the arts/museums sector which aims to counter discrimination and disadvantage and build an inclusive meaning of Britishness fit for its communities, and ultimately creating positive change in our society.

### **Museums & Learning: thinking and doing**

Museums have a vital role to play in society through engaging people in both formal and informal learning. Museums have the potential to supplement learning in the classroom, to involve parents in their children's education, as well as to motivate adults into further learning. We support plans for England's museums to increase connections with schools in order to target the next generations of learners. A report looking into the engagement of non-users of London's museums from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities noted that of the people participating in the study, young people were the least interested in visiting museums.<sup>2</sup> Further, since the BME population has a young age structure, efforts to target young people could also help ensure that these communities are further included in and served by the museums' strategy.

In our own search for best practice examples on how schools can better involve BME parents in their children's education,<sup>3</sup> we came across Northumberland Park Community School in Haringey. This school has linked with local museums, such as the Science Museum and the Museum of London, for family learning programmes.<sup>4</sup> Their initiatives targeted a minority ethnic group, in this case African Caribbean pupils, to engage in learning outside the school environment with their parents. These types of events are beneficial not only for their learning value, but enable better links between families, schools and museums. Therefore, recognising the benefit of engagement with communities who may not otherwise visit museums, we support the priority to understand and build programmes of formal and informal learning in museums.

### **Finding Our Place in the World: the building blocks of belonging**

We support the DCMS's priority for museums to embrace their role in fostering, exploring, celebrating and questioning the identities of diverse communities. Elsewhere<sup>5</sup> we have argued that Britain is at a turning-point in its history: it could become narrow and inward-looking, with rifts and divisions amongst its regions and communities; or it could develop as an outward-looking community, at ease with its internal diversity.

In order to engage communities, special attention could be focused on the past and present of ethnic diversity. While the reality of ethnic diversity in England preceded the 1948 landing of the Windrush, recent history has been a period of rapid change. A report looking into the engagement of non-users of London's

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<sup>1</sup> CFMEB (2000) *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh Report*. London: Profile Books for the Runnymede Trust

<sup>2</sup> Tissier, Damian & Nathoo, Samir Singh. (2004) *Black and Minority Ethnic Engagement with London's Museums. Telling it Like it is: Non-User Research*. London: Strategic Urban Futures p.11

<sup>3</sup> Belfon, Vastiana. (2007, forthcoming) *Tell Me What I Need to Know*. London: Runnymede Trust

<sup>4</sup> Northumberland Park School "Extended School Learning Activities" accessed online at: <http://www.northumberlandpark.haringey.sch.uk/community/extendedschoolsactivity01.htm>

<sup>5</sup> CFMEB (2000) p. xii

museums from black and ethnic minority communities noted that participants felt museums did not adequately reflect contemporary life, thus having little relevance for some members of black and minority ethnic communities.<sup>6</sup> Embracing the migrant experience, as some museums have done through their exhibitions and activities, is a step towards engaging communities that may think museums represent a, 'white middle-class view of the past.'<sup>7</sup> Our own attempts to reconcile the imbalance of learning resources on the lived experience and history of cultural diversity found in Britain can be found through the Real Histories Directory ([www.realhistories.org.uk](http://www.realhistories.org.uk)).

The role of museums in developing Britain as an internally diverse yet cohesive community is significant. Representing ethnic diversity in museums' programmes should not only be seen as catering to BME communities' interests, but rather as a benefit to society at large. It has been noted that, "museums have the potential to help people learn about and to foster sensitivity towards other cultures and races."<sup>8</sup>

### **Maximising the potential of people**

As the guardians of our artefacts, museums hold a direct line to the representation and interpretation of human potential. As such, museums have a special duty to ensure that their institutions are made up of people that come from all of our communities and reflect the full range of experience, understanding and interpretation that makes up our society.

We share the DCMS's concern of the limited ethnic diversity of people in positions of influence in museums, precisely because of cultural organisations' task of representing the communities that they serve. We support the priority of museums' governing bodies and workforces to reflect this diversity. However, a diverse workforce cannot and will not be thoroughly and convincingly achieved without a strong corresponding belief in the universality of equality and justice, and the equal worth of all. The museum sector needs to work harder to ensure this message is taken on board by all in the sector.

We support the creation of common platforms from which to launch the various stages of people's working careers and job development; the special preference traineeships and fellowships such as Diversify, Inspire, and Young Graduates for Museums and Galleries are indeed welcome.<sup>9</sup> We stress that alongside initiatives such as these, there is a need for strong commitment to change the working culture of museums, especially by museum leadership, specifically in order to foster a broader framework that values diversity and equal opportunities, making them integral to museum working culture. Museums implicitly tell the story of their organisation through new employment policies, a different style of marketing, and revised job descriptions. These aspects will need to change much more quickly in order to show commitment to the base framework of valuing diversity.

Recognising a broader range of skills from applicants into museums is recommended to combat the institutional barriers to black and ethnic minority recruitment and retention. Thus we share the DCMS's recognition that a restrictive single route for career progression is to be avoided. In the report into the non-users of museums from visible BME backgrounds mentioned previously, there was a perception that

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<sup>6</sup> Tissier & Nathoo (2004) p.36

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.36

<sup>8</sup> Gray, David & Chadwick, Alan. (2001) "Museums: Using Keyworkers to Deliver Lifelong Learning," in: *International Review of Education/ Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft/ Revue Internationale de l'Éducation*. 47:5. p.432-433

<sup>9</sup> Khan, Omar (2006) *Why Preferential Policies Can Be Fair—Achieving Equality for Members of Disadvantaged Groups*. London: Runnymede Trust

museums were too specialist and formal, and that they do not encourage participation from BME groups.<sup>10</sup> As suggested elsewhere, the economic inequality some ethnic minorities experience in the labour market may influence their career choices; museum curatorial positions which hold a minimum requirement of significant periods of unpaid work experience alongside a postgraduate qualification may deter applicants who may have other valuable experience and skills.<sup>11</sup> Consequently the potential negative impact on BME groups needs to be understood and rectified.

In conclusion, we support the priorities outlined in order to forge a strategy for England's museums to foster greater diversity in attendance and employment in museums, as well as promoting learning across age groups and a common sense of belonging across our diverse communities. Nevertheless, we urge greater commitment to this approach and greater haste. These issues have been on the DCMS and museums' agenda for some time now;<sup>12</sup> progress has been far too slow.

We hope that these comments will provide a useful contribution to the future of England's museums and look forward to learning the resulting intentions of government on implementing these priorities. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this response, please contact me at the address above or by email [m.lafleche@runnymede trust.org](mailto:m.lafleche@runnymede trust.org).

Yours sincerely,

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Director

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<sup>10</sup> Tissier & Nathoo (2004) p.3

<sup>11</sup> Sandell, R. (2000) "The Strategic Significance of Workforce Diversity in Museums" in: *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 6:3 p. 218

<sup>12</sup> Please see attached speech, Lafèche, Michelynn. (2005) "The Value of Diversity in the Workforce"