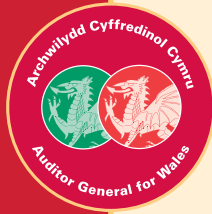




COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES OF WALES

Report by the National Audit Office Wales on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales



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John Bourn
Auditor General for Wales

National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

22 April 2004

The Auditor General for Wales is totally independent of the National Assembly.
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bodies have used their resources in discharging their functions.

This report was prepared for the Auditor General for Wales by the
National Audit Office Wales.

The National Audit Office Wales study team comprised Gillian Body, Dawn
Brace and Manel Dencker. For further information about the National Audit
Office Wales please contact:

National Audit Office Wales
3-4 Park Place
Cardiff
CF10 3DP
Tel: 029 2067 8500

email: gillian.body@nao.gsi.gov.uk

ian.summers@nao.gsi.gov.uk

Web site address: <http://www.agw.wales.gov.uk/index.htm>





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COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES OF WALES

Report by Auditor General for Wales, presented to the National Assembly on 22 April 2004

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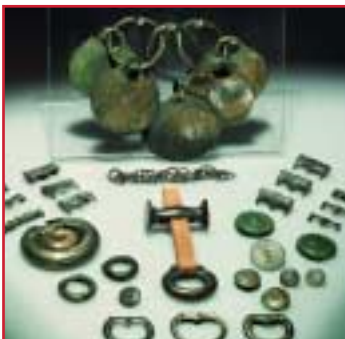
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Executive Summary



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- 1 The National Museums and Galleries of Wales (the Museum) is one of Wales' premier heritage organisations. Operating out of eight locations, the Museum's stated purpose is that it "develops, cares for, studies and encourages access to its collections for the benefit of society in perpetuity". The Museum's collections contain some 4.7 million items, covering the visual arts, natural history, traditional culture and industrial history. As an Assembly Sponsored Public Body, some 88 per cent of the Museum's £20 million budget is publicly funded by the National Assembly for Wales.
- 2 Many of the items in the Museum's collections require careful management to safeguard their cultural or scientific value. Good collections management is important, not only for the preservation of the collections for future generations, but also to enable as many people as possible to see, appreciate and use them now. It is in the nature of a museum collection to grow as new items of value are taken into the collection at a faster rate than items are lost, damaged or lose their importance. In deciding the priority and resourcing of its collections management activity, the Museum has to balance the multiple and sometimes competing demands of its differing responsibilities, initiatives and functions.
- 3 The National Audit Office and the Westminster Committee of Public Accounts have previously considered the performance of the Museum (see Appendix 2) and made a number of recommendations to help the Museum improve the management of its collections. This study examines how well the Museum is managing its collections today. In summary, we found that:
 - the Museum has made good progress in improving its collections management - it now has a clearer and more precise picture of the size of its collection than in the past, and has better records and information about individual items than was previously the case. Nonetheless there is a substantial backlog of curation work which inhibits the Museum's ability to verify its entire collection (Part 2);
 - the quality of storage at the Museum has improved following recent investment, but there remains substantial scope to enhance further the 43 per cent of storage classed as poor or worse (by area). The Museum is also struggling to overcome the significant backlog of work required to stabilise the condition of its collection. The Assembly's financial support of £3.5 million will assist the Museum in improving its conservation and storage facilities (Part 3); and that
 - visitor numbers have increased significantly since the introduction of free entry to the Museum in April 2001. Although much of the collection is not on display to the public, the Museum makes use of other ways of facilitating public access. Access to the Museum's collections could be further enhanced by tackling curation and conservation backlogs, extending opening hours and expanding the loans programme (Part 4).



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The Museum now has better information on its collections but backlogs remain in documenting and physically verifying items

4 The Museum's main aims in documenting and physically verifying its collections are to improve accountability for the collections; improve access to collection information; and to improve the security of the collections. The Museum recognises that it is essential to maintain a programme for physical verification of the collections. In the past, the Museum had failed to maintain complete and up to date records of its collections and failed to verify its collection assets on a regular basis. The Museum now has clearer definitions for counting items and a more accurate picture of departments' holdings, which has allowed the revised estimate of the total size of the collections to be calculated at 4.7 million items.



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5 The Museum keeps manual records for all items in its collections. The introduction of computerised information systems has improved accountability and accessibility of the collections. However, only a third of the Museum's collections is currently held on computerised record. Some 20 per cent of items in the collection have been fully catalogued to a level of information suitable for the sharing of knowledge for research or display purposes. The Museum estimates that there would be a significant cost of up to £1.65 million associated with removing the substantial documentation and curation backlog across its sites as a whole.



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6 We found that the Museum does not systematically verify its entire collection but focuses on physically verifying those assets for which there are computerised records, which tend to be those items of greater risk and value. Over the past five years, the Museum has verified 23 per cent of its collections. However, items held on computerised records comprise only a third of the Museum's total collection.

Despite improvements in storage conditions, the Museum needs to do more to improve the condition of its collection assets

7 Good storage and environmental conditions are a fundamental part of the preventative conservation required to minimise any deterioration in the condition of items in the Museum's collection. Remedial conservation involves treating items to stabilise or enhance their cultural or scientific value. Unsatisfactory storage affects access to the collections, puts objects at the risk of deterioration and can negate expensive conservation work already carried out. Following major investment, including the acquisition of a Collections Centre at Nantgarw, some 57 per cent of the Museum's storage is classed as good or very good (by area) compared with only 29 per cent in 1996. However, 43 per cent (by area) of storage remains, at best, poor, and there are examples of damage to items stored in such conditions. The Museum has obtained £3.5 million from the Assembly and is seeking further funding from external sources and grants to improve its conservation and storage facilities at the Nantgarw Collections Centre and other sites in an attempt to solve storage problems for the next 15-20 years.

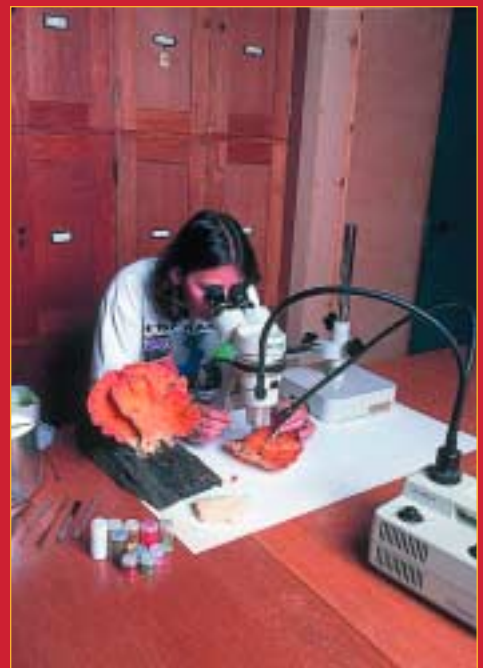
8 The Museum is struggling to overcome the significant backlog of conservation work required to stabilise or enhance the condition of its collection. The Museum's overall estimate of its conservation backlog equates to approximately 20 staff spending each of the next 20 years addressing the backlog alone - a total of 384 staff years at current staffing levels. The Museum acknowledges that most departments do not have the resources to tackle the existing backlog of conservation work. However, the Museum is increasingly focusing on less costly preventative conservation, to minimise the deterioration of the collections which, along with the planned improvements in storage conditions, should help stabilise the condition of the collections. The Museum intends to prioritise the active conservation of deteriorating items to improve their condition for those items which are to be displayed.

The Museum is looking to further improve access to items in its collections

- 9 Large numbers of items in the Museum's collections are not intended for display, but the Museum recognises that both physical proximity to objects and enabling the intellectual use of information held concerning them are important. A small proportion - 0.57 per cent - of the Museum's collections is on display, but more people than ever are accessing the Museum's collections through a variety of means. The Museum has sought to improve access to its collections to wider socio-economic and age groups. Following the introduction of free entry in 2001, there were 1.4 million visitors in 2001-02 - a rise of some 87 per cent, and in 2002-03 the museum attracted nearly 1.3 million visitors. Over 25,000 items are on loan world-wide and nearly 12 per cent of the collection is accessible electronically. The Museum is therefore doing much to facilitate public access to items not on conventional display in its own premises.
- 10 Although several of its sites are open seven days a week, the Museum has shorter opening hours than the other museums and galleries that responded to our survey. The Museum also has a successful loans programme and is seeking the resources to extend this further through the evolving Partnership Programmes with other Museums and institutions in Wales and elsewhere. Finally, access to items in the Museum's collections is hampered by the curation and conservation backlogs, because items cannot be put on display, loaned out, shared through research or accessed electronically if the records held are insufficient or if conservation of the item is required.

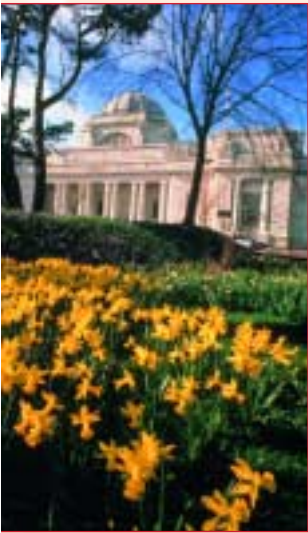
THE BIG PICTURE

Founded almost a century ago, the National Museums and Galleries of Wales is one of the principal repositories of the history of Wales. Access to the 4.7 million items in its collections is fundamentally dependent on good collections management - enhancing, researching, interpreting and preserving the collections themselves. A record 1.4 million visitors followed the introduction of free access in April 2001, and through pre-arranged viewing, electronic access and its loans programme the Museum is developing ways to make more accessible the overwhelming majority of items - over 99 per cent - not on, or not meant for, public display. The Museum recognises that even more could be done to facilitate access, but in the areas of curation, storage and conservation real changes are necessary. Despite improvements in recent years, 43 per cent of the Museum's storage is poor, or worse; there is a conservation backlog which would take 384 years of staff time to fix; and a curation backlog which the Museum estimates would cost over £1.6 million to completely overcome. These problems mean that the well-being of some items in the collection is at risk, and that the potential for education and access is hampered. The Museum has secured additional funding towards solving its storage problems but on curation and conservation it will need to review how its existing resources might be applied more effectively in reducing the outstanding backlogs. The Museum has made progress in recent years and recognises that more needs to be done to ensure that the collections are properly cared for and that access to the collections - the heritage and culture of Wales - is optimised.



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Recommendations



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- i The Museum should draw on the experience and examples of good practice in collections management that other museums and galleries have to offer.
- ii The Museum needs to continue to press ahead in bringing the level of documentation held on its collections up to its minimum standard. Its current work in this area should set targets for the implementation of this strategy, and specify the timeframe over which these targets are to be achieved.
- iii The Museum should extend its spot checks, designed to test the condition and location of items within its collection, to include the items held only on manual records.
- iv The Museum should formulate an action plan with timescales and costings of how it will seek to address the conservation backlog, taking into account the planned improvements in storage at the Nantgarw Collections Centre and other sites, and the resources required to finance this.
- v The Museum should use the impact assessment currently undertaken at the point of acquisition to inform its planning for the future growth of the collections.
- vi The Museum should, with some urgency, complete its assessment of how best to use the funding committed by the Assembly, to lever in additional external funding, so as to improve the storage of its collections.
- vii Given the growing nature of the collection, the Museum should periodically revisit its planning assumptions to ensure that they remain robust. Furthermore, the Museum should formulate an action plan with timescales and costings of how it will seek to address storage problems beyond the 15-20 years that the planned improved storage facilities might cater for.
- viii The Museum should publicise more widely the fact that all items are accessible upon request.
- ix The Museum should revise its targets to reflect its desire to increase the proportion of items physically on display, especially given the proposed improvements to storage space at the Nantgarw Collections Centre and other sites.
- x The Museum should carry out research into optimum opening hours with a view to maximising visitor numbers. In the light of research into the likely demand for extended opening hours, it should consider carrying out a trial of alternative opening times.
- xi In the interests of improving access to the collections the Museum should continue to find ways to extend the loans programme.
- xii The Museum should evaluate the achievements of the Partnership Programme in increasing access to its collections through loans to other museums, to inform how best to extend this Programme.



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Introduction and audit overview of the Museum

1

The Museum comprises eight museums and galleries around Wales

- 1.1 The National Museums and Galleries of Wales is one of the principal repositories of the history of Wales. It currently operates museums in eight locations across Wales, as well as a Collections Centre at Nantgarw, and holds a collection of some 4.7 million items relating to the visual arts, natural history, traditional culture and industrial history. Two of these sites - the Turner House Gallery and the Segontium Roman Fort Museum - are operated in partnership with other bodies. The construction of a ninth museum, the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea, began in January 2003 and is expected to open in 2005. The nature and location of these sites are shown in **Figure 1 overleaf**.

The Museum is an Assembly Sponsored Public Body but operates at an arm's length from Government

- 1.2 The National Museums and Galleries of Wales was established in 1907 by Royal Charter, as the National Museum of Wales. The Museum retains its status as an independent chartered body, but it is also supported by the Welsh Assembly Government as an Assembly Sponsored Public Body. The Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport sets the policy framework for the Museum on an annual basis. The connections between the Museum's aims and strategic issues and the priorities of the National Assembly are shown in **Figure 2 overleaf**.
- 1.3 The National Assembly's *Cultural Strategy for Wales*, launched in February 2002, identifies the Museum as the lead body for a number of action points, which are reflected in the Museum's Corporate Plan for 2003-2006. The Museum also contributes to the Assembly's strategy as a member of Cymru'n Creu, a consortium of cultural organisations that promotes partnership between its members.
- 1.4 The salaried head of the Museum is the Director General. The Museum is a charity and is governed by a Court and Council structure. The Council, made up of 16 members, performs the role of a board of trustees. It holds the collections in trust for the benefit of the people of Wales,

and agree strategies and policies for the Museum. The Court, with a membership of 57, is not a decision making body, but is intended to represent the interests of the public of Wales. Its role is to receive from the Council and the Director General an annual report on the affairs of the Museum, an annual summary of the audited accounts of the Museum and a statement of the capital and investments of the Museum and from the Treasurer an annual report on the financial affairs of the Museum. Following the Quinquennial Review of the Museum in 2001, undertaken by the School of Public Policy at the University of Birmingham, the Museum is considering reorganising the system of governance of the Museum and, in particular, whether there is a need for a Court. Discussions are ongoing between the Assembly and the Museum.

- 1.5 Four advisory and standard-setting bodies relevant to the Museum's work are the Council of Museums in Wales, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, the Museums Association and the mda. Their roles are set out in the box below.

Until 31 March 2004, the Assembly funded the **Council of Museums in Wales**, which provided advice and guidance to its member local museums. From 1 April 2004, a new unit called **CyMAL: Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales** has been established within the Welsh Assembly Government. CyMAL will incorporate the majority of functions previously undertaken by the Council of Museums in Wales and will develop and implement policies for local museums, archives and libraries in Wales.

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council was launched in April 2000 as the UK-wide strategic body working with and for museums, archives and libraries.

The Museums Association is a non-governmental membership organisation that represents the interests of museum and gallery employees, museums and galleries as institutions and their collections. Its Code of Ethics is widely accepted within the profession.

The mda (formerly known as the Museums Documentation Association) is funded by the Museums Libraries and Archive Council for its work in England and by the Council of Museums in Wales for its work in Wales. It issues and updates its UK museum documentation standard - SPECTRUM.

1

The Museum's sites



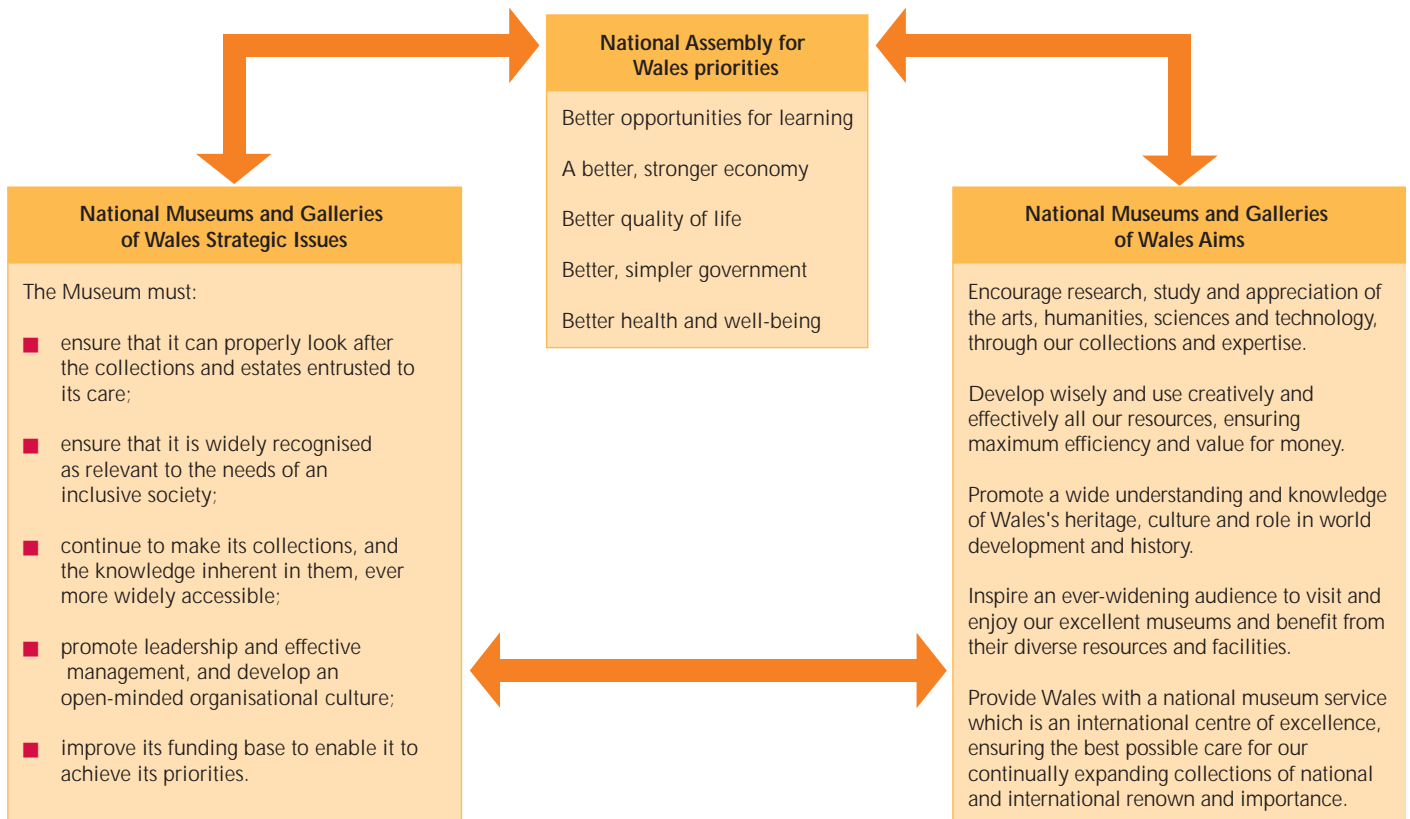
Source: *The Museum*

Nature of the collections held by Museums' sites

- A** The **Segontium Roman Fort Museum** (Caernarfon, Gwynedd) display artefacts showing the impact the Romans had on the area. The excavated remains outside are the responsibility of Cadw, the National Trust and Gwynedd County Council, whilst the Museum is operated by a consortium with the National Museums and Galleries of Wales retaining ownership and responsibility for the collections.
- B** The **Welsh Slate Museum** (Llanberis, Gwynedd) is an original Victorian quarry workshop which houses a collection of objects and materials relating to the Welsh slate industry. The collection includes slate working equipment and locomotives, along with engineering, foundry, tinsmith and carpentry equipment.
- C** The **Museum of the Welsh Woollen Industry** (Dre-Fach Felindre, Carmarthenshire) houses working examples of woollen manufacturing machinery from the 18th century onwards, as well as a functioning mill, together with a collection of textiles and archives relating to the Welsh woollen industry.
- D** The **National Waterfront Museum** Swansea, which is expected to open in 2005, will exhibit Wales' industrial and maritime heritage and highlight how it has shaped today's economy and society.
- E** The **Collections Centre** (Nantgarw, Rhondda Cynon Taf) is open to the public by appointment. Items are not on display as they would be in a museum but are stored in such a way as to facilitate access. It houses most of the Museum's industrial and maritime collection, resited from the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum in Cardiff Bay.
- F** The collections of the **Museum of Welsh Life** (St Fagans, Cardiff) illustrate and interpret the daily life of people of Wales from the late Middle Ages to the present day. They include re-erected buildings, costumes, transport, a library and archives of photographs, and audio-visual resources.
- G** The **Turner House Gallery** (Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan) provides facilities for temporary exhibitions, mainly art. It is leased by a local arts organisation.
- H** The **National Museum & Gallery** (Cathays Park, Cardiff) houses collections in archaeology and numismatics (coins and related items), biology, geology and art. It also houses a library.
- I** The **Roman Legionary Museum** (Caerleon, Newport) stores and displays a collection of 500,000 objects from the Roman fortress of Isca (Caerleon) and its environs, as well as from the legionary base at Usk.
- J** **Big Pit: The National Mining Museum of Wales** (Blaenafon, Torfaen) is a working colliery. Previously a tourist attraction in its own right, it became a part of the Museum in January 2001.

2

The connections between the Museum's aims and strategic issues and the priorities of the National Assembly



NOTE

Since the Assembly elections in 2003, the Assembly has updated its aims and strategic issues and is currently in consultation with the Museum about the Museum's own strategic issues and aims.

Source: *the Museum*

The majority of the Museum's income comes from the National Assembly for Wales

1.6 In 2002-03, the Museum's income was over £20 million, some 88 per cent of which was grant-in-aid from the National Assembly for Wales (**Figure 3 overleaf**). Its other income came from other sources such as commercial activities, charitable organisations, European funds and lottery distributors.¹ Alongside action being taken by the Museum to generate income from these other sources, the Museum has bid for additional funding from the Assembly totalling just over £15 million for the three years to 2006. The basis for this bid is to cover a review of their remuneration and pension arrangements, opening and operating the National Waterfront Museum Swansea, extending opening hours at selected sites, developing the collections facility at Nantgarw and enhancing its capital maintenance programme.

- 1.7 In April 2001, the Museum implemented the Assembly's policy of universal free admission to Wales' permanent national collections. Before the implementation of this policy, any increase in visitor numbers would result in additional revenue for the Museum through visitor charges, which amounted to £685,000 in 2000-01. Although the Assembly increased the grant-in-aid to the Museum to compensate for the loss of revenue from visitor charges, this financial provision was not automatically linked to changes in visitor numbers.
- 1.8 About a quarter of the Museum's budget in 2002-03 was spent on managing its collections. The remainder is spent on education and exhibitions, warding and technical services, marketing and fundraising, management and administration. In deciding its strategic priorities and the allocation of resources, the Museum has to balance the multiple and sometimes competing demands of its differing initiatives and functions.

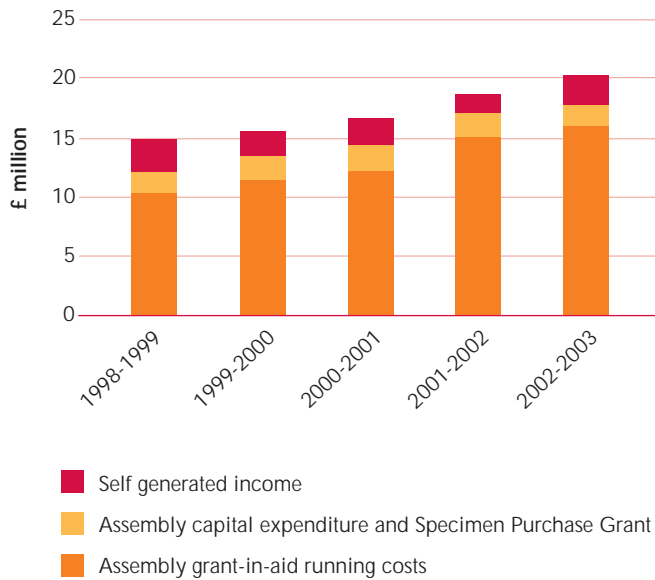
¹ A recent report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (*Income Generated by the Museums and Galleries, HC 235, 2003-04*) examined how museums and galleries go about their income generating activities and how they could increase their income.

3

The Museum's sources of income

88 per cent of the Museum's income is grant-in-aid from the National Assembly for Wales.

Museum income



NOTE

Excluding income from commercial activities, charitable organisations, European Funds and lottery distributors.

Source: The Museum

The Museum's collections require careful management to safeguard their value

1.9 The nature of many of the items in the Museum's collections is such that they require careful management to safeguard their cultural or scientific value. The management of the Museum's collections involves their documentation, curation, conservation and storage. A 'life cycle' of collections management is outlined in Figure 4 and a glossary of collections management terminology is set out at Appendix 1. It is in the nature of a museum collection to grow over time as new items are taken into the collection at a faster rate than items are lost, damaged or lose their importance. This growth in the size of the collection results in increased storage and conservation needs.

1.10 Collections management at the Museum is governed by a set of policy statements which together make up the Museum's Collections Management Policy. The policies were last reviewed in 2000 and will be reviewed again in 2005. These policy statements are each backed up by more detailed documented procedures for internal guidance and use. Each of these policies has been approved by the Museum's governing Council. The Collections Management Policies are based upon nationally recognised best practice standards as set down by the Museums Association (see paragraph 1.5).

1.11 Council members provide advice at subject level and according to some cross-cutting themes. These groups, supported by officer groups, provide strategic leadership within the Museum for collections management. In the past three years, the Museum has carried out a review of collections management (2001) and a conservation review (2002), the latter involving representatives of other museums.

Scope of the National Audit Office Wales examination

1.12 The National Audit Office and the Westminster Committee of Public Accounts have previously made a number of criticisms of the management and control of the Museum (see Appendix 2). In particular, these criticisms focused on the failure of the Museum to maintain complete and up-to-date records of their collection assets and to verify them physically on a regular basis.

1.13 This study seeks to follow-up this previous work as part of a broader examination of the issues surrounding the management of the Museum's collections, in particular:

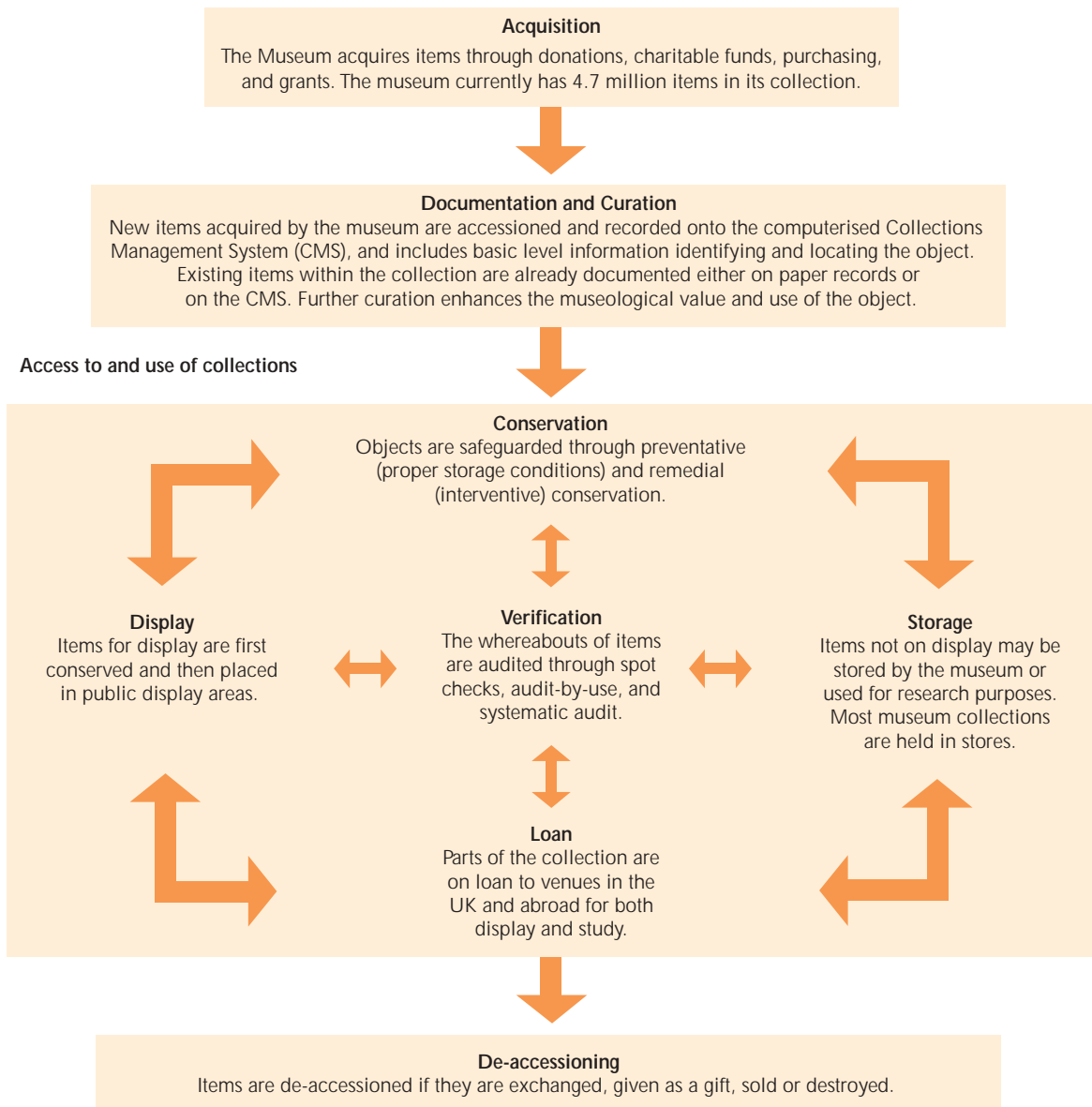
- the documentation, curation and verification of the collection (Part 2);
- the storage and conservation of the collection (Part 3); and
- access to the collections (Part 4).

1.14 A full description of the methods we used is set out at Appendix 3. In summary, the National Audit Office Wales carried out work in four stages:

- we visited all the departments of the Museum across a number of sites, interviewing the relevant curatorial staff and other senior managers, reviewing documentation and observing display, storage space and information management systems at first hand;
- we carried out a survey of other museums in the United Kingdom and overseas to establish comparative data and identify good practice;
- we visited the National Museums Liverpool (formerly the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside) to benchmark the work of the Museum and to follow up issues arising from the survey;
- we interviewed the Museum's sponsor division at the Assembly.

1.15 This report includes a number of figures which compare the collections management performance of the Museum with other museums and galleries that responded to our survey (see Appendix 3). Those figures provide indicators of good practice and we recommend that the Museum should draw on the experience and examples of good practice in collections management that other museums and galleries have to offer.

4 Collections management 'life cycle'



NOTE

A glossary of collections management terminology is at Appendix 1.

Source: National Audit Office Wales

2 Documentation, curation and verification

Documentation, curation and verification provide essential information on the nature and security of the collection

2.1 A key component of any museum's collections management activity, to safeguard and improve access to the assets that it holds, is the availability of complete and up to date records of its collections. It is also important that the Museum physically verifies its holdings on a regular basis, as a means of testing that the records held are accurate and as a check of the physical security and conditions of items held. This part of the report examines the progress the Museum has made in improving its performance in the documentation, curation and verification of its collections.

Definitions

- **Documentation** ensures that the Museum has a basic record for an object, group of objects or a collection. It involves gathering sufficient data to prove title to an object, and to identify and locate the object.
- **Curation** refers to the whole process of enhancing the information held about an object, as well as the documenting, photographing and cataloguing of the object. (It does not include physical intervention to the object itself - known as conservation, although the curation process embraces packaging and placing objects in their proper place).
- **Physical verification** is the process whereby the Museum establishes, at a given point in time, the physical presence and location of a particular object in its collection.

2.2 In summary, the Museum holds manual records on every item in its collection. The introduction of computerised information systems has improved accessibility and accountability of the collections. However, only a third of the collection is held on computerised record and documented to at least the level considered by the Museum to be the minimum standard. The Museum thus has a considerable way to go in terms of documentation and curation; the Museum estimates that it would take an additional £1.65 million over ten years to deal with the documentation and curation backlog. We found inconsistencies in the implementation of the Museum's physical verification of holdings, which focuses on those items held on computerised records.

Previous assessments identified problems in the record-keeping and verification of items in the Museum's collections

2.3 In 1984, the National Audit Office reported that the Museum failed to maintain complete and up to date records of its collection assets and failed regularly to verify these assets. In 1997, it was still not possible to derive an accurate total number for all items in the collection and there was still no written policy on verification (see Appendix 2). The National Audit Office recommended in 1997 that there should be a strategy for tackling the verification backlog, addressing priority risk areas and those of greatest importance, and that the Museum should consider developing a performance indicator to assist in raising the profile of the work. The Museum has since produced a suite of policies and procedures, including one on verification, and carried out major reviews of documentation, conservation, collections management and storage.

The Museum now has a clearer picture of the size of its collection than in the past

2.4 The Museum undertook a review of collections management in 2001 to identify how to improve its approach to this work, including attaining a clearer picture of the size of its collections. Prior to this review, the Museum had estimated the size of its collections at 7.5 million individual items or lots. As a result of this review, the Museum has developed clearer definitions of counting and grouping items and now estimates it holds some 4.7 million items, spread across the departments as shown in **Figure 5**.

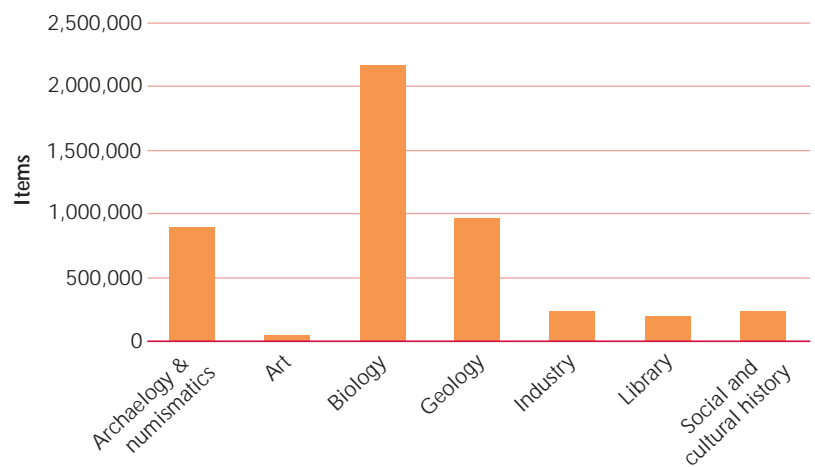
The minimum standard of information is held for only a third of the Museum's collections

2.5 The level of information recorded on an item affects the Museum's ability to interpret that item through display or to share information about it through further research. The Museum defines the level of information it holds on its collections under the following three categories (the box opposite provides an explanation of the type of information held for these three levels of documentation).

- **Inventory level information** is the minimum standard that the Museum deems necessary to achieve adequate accountability in terms of location and ownership, and includes object title, number and evidence of ownership. For practical reasons, some items, such as minute shells and pottery fragments, are grouped and documented together.
- **Catalogue level information** provides more detailed documentation to facilitate the sharing of knowledge for research or display purposes. Such information depends on what the item is going to be used for and the type of collection being catalogued, but might include chemical analysis, valuation, information about where an item was found. Further research can always add to that catalogue information.
- Unconsolidated and unverified data, held on manual records, is called **pre-inventory level information**.

5 Items held by the Museum's departments

The department of Biodiversity & Systematic Biology holds half of the Museum's 4.7 million items.



Source: The Museum

Pre-inventory level

- Unique identifier: name and number
 - Ownership details
 - Location
 - Status: eg loan, disposed of
- (not verified and held manually)

Inventory level

- Unique identifier: name and number
 - Weight, size, material, artist
 - Ownership details
 - Location
 - Status: eg loan, disposed of
- (all verified and computerised)

Catalogue level

- Unique identifier: name and number
 - Object description
 - Field collection information
 - Historical information
 - Ownership details
 - Reference to published bibliographic information
 - Valuation
 - Analytical information (eg X-ray, chemical analysis, dating)
 - Location
 - Status: eg loan, disposed of
- (all verified and computerised)
(see Appendix 1)



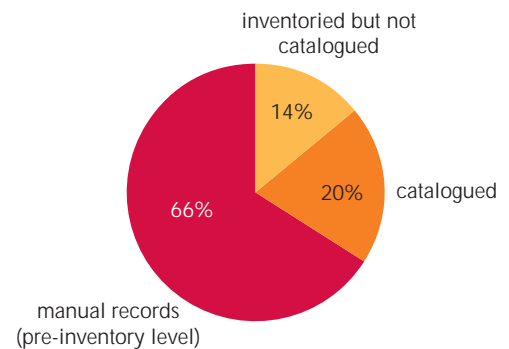
2.6 We found that the museums and galleries sector do not have a common definition of these terms, making it difficult to benchmark performance. For instance, the Museum's definition of 'inventory' includes being held on computerised records, and the Museum thus believes that it sets a higher standard for its documentation than is the case for much of the museums and galleries sector.

2.7 The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), the national development agency working for and on behalf of museums, libraries and archives (see paragraph 1.5) told us that inventory level (basic) documentation for all collections is essential but every museum should aim to carry out more intensive documentation work as and when necessary. Although the MLA's Museum Registration standard does define the elements necessary for basic documentation, such as a number and location reference, the way individual museums interpret the term 'inventory' varies and reference to inventory level documentation can refer to either paper or computerised records. Full cataloguing for every item is an ideal to aspire to and museums will work towards it according to their priorities and the ways collections are to be used, for example displayed or loaned.

2.8 **Figure 6** shows that only about a third (34 per cent) of the Museum's collection is documented to a level regarded by the Museum as being the minimum standard (ie at least inventory level). The remaining two thirds of the collection are held on manual records which, particularly as they may be held in a number of different places, are more at risk of being incomplete or inaccurate. The Museum has increased the number of items documented to inventory or catalogue standard by over 1.1 million records within the past five years (23 per cent of its total collection). The Museum acknowledges that improving the documentation of its collections' records to inventory level standard should take priority over cataloguing, and aims to have 42 per cent (from 34.2 per cent) of its collection documented to at least inventory level standard by 2005-06.

6 Analysis of standards of documentation of the Museum's collections

A third of the Museum's collection is documented to at least inventory level, on computerised record.



Source: *The Museum*

The Museum is seeking to increase the proportion of records held electronically

2.9 The Museum holds manual records on every item in the Museum's collections. Items documented to inventory or catalogue level standard are also held on computer. In 1992, the Museum introduced its electronic Collections Management System, which now holds computerised records on nearly two million objects (some 34 per cent of the entire collection). The introduction of this system and other stand-alone computerised systems² has improved the ease with which the Museum's collections records can be used, ensured that all data on an item is held together, reduced the risk of losing records and facilitated the sharing of information. This computerisation has encouraged and facilitated heritage bodies working together to improve access to collections, as set out in **Case study A**.

2.10 The Museum prioritises data entry onto the Collections Management System for any new items; items on display; items on inward or outward loan; items of high monetary or scientific value; and unique collections. This prioritisation recognises that items which are leaving the premises, which are financially valuable or for which records have yet to be established are those which are the most vulnerable.

² FilemakerPro in the department of Biology and Systematic Biology, and the Library Management System.

A Archaeological records



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ENDEX is a collaborative project with the Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Wales, Cadw and the four Regional Welsh Archaeological Trusts. It is a national computerised database, comprising core information, of archaeological sites, monuments and buildings, and since the Museum became a partner, artifacts in its collections. The data provided by the Museum is drawn from its Collections Management System.

There are over 100,000 computerised archaeological records (individual items and groups of objects), but not all are submitted to ENDEX, because some do not, for example, have a grid reference. The information is for the use of partners to assist their work, such as development control and management of the heritage, and research. The records have agreed fields and partners are working towards consistent terminology.



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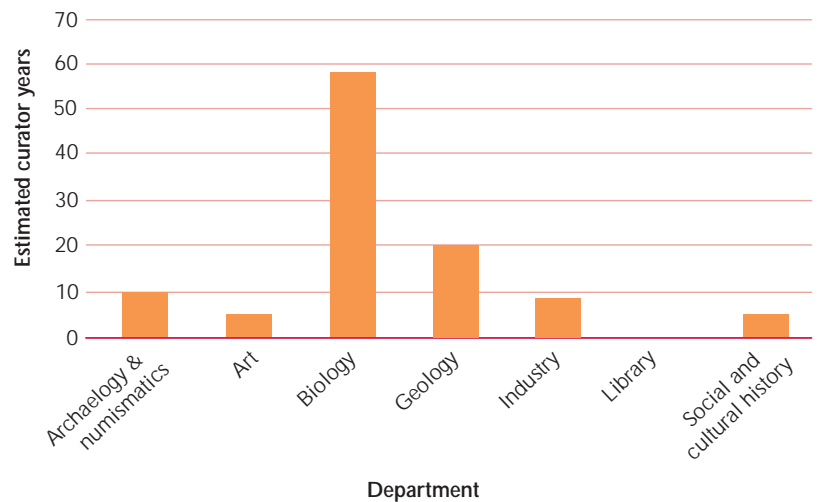
The Museum has a substantial curation backlog, which would be costly to remove

2.11 In 2001, the Museum estimated that it would take at least 106 curator years to overcome its existing backlog (to achieve inventory level documentation, scientific documentation and cataloguing of its entire collection) ranging from five years for the art department to 58 years for biology - the department with the largest number of items. **Figure 7 below** shows the estimated backlog for each of the Museum departments. At current resourcing levels, involving 84 curators, this would equate to over a year of each individual's time on this task alone.

2.12 The Museum has estimated that to curate fully the entire collection to catalogue level over ten years would cost £200,000 a year for the first five years and £130,000 after that, cumulating in a total cost of £1.65 million. The Museum's Documentation Unit (responsible for maintaining collection and verification records) is now leading a review of the targets for documentation and curation levels so the Museum can progress a Museum-wide strategy for documenting its collections.

7 The Museum's curation backlog

The Museum estimates that it would take 106 curator years to overcome the existing curator backlog.



NOTE

There is no information relating to the Library.

Source: The Museum

KEY POINTS

on documentation and curation:

- The Museum now has clearer definitions for counting items and a more accurate picture of its holdings than was the case when previously examined by the National Audit Office.
- The documentation and curation of the Museum's collections has historically been - and remains - an area of considerable weakness. Despite audit observations going back to 1984, and despite the considerable progress made in the last five years, the Museum's records for two thirds of its collections is below that which it considers to be the minimum standard, that is inventory level information.
- The introduction of computerised systems, especially the Collections Management System has improved inventory, cataloguing, accountability and accessibility. Only a third of records for the Museum's collections are currently computerised, although plans are in place to increase this proportion. The items already computerised are those of high monetary or scientific value, as well as those which are the most vulnerable.
- The remaining two thirds of items held only on manual records, some of which are held on records in a number of locations, are more at risk of being incomplete or inaccurate.
- The Museum faces a significant challenge if it were to complete the curation of its collection. It estimates that at current resource levels, it would take £1.65 million over ten years to deal completely with the backlog. This estimated cost will alter as the Museum realistically revises its goals in this area.

Recommendation:

- The Museum needs to continue to press ahead in bringing the level of documentation held on its collections up to its minimum standard. Its current work in this area should set targets for the implementation of this strategy, and specify the timeframe over which these targets are to be achieved.

The Museum does not systematically verify its entire collection

2.13 The Museum physically verifies objects within its collections to confirm, at a given point in time, the physical presence, condition and location of the object. The results of this check are noted on the record held for that item. The Museum's policy states that "all departments must carry out all forms of verification". There are three types of verification audit:

- **Systematic audit** is the systematic listing and checking of the Museum's entire collection, and of items on loan to the Museum;
- **Spot checking** is the periodic random checking of the items in the collections. Under the Museum's procedures, a sample of each area of the collection should be audited during a twelve month period; and
- **Audit by use** is the audit of objects that are going out on loan, returning from loan, being put on display, accessed during routine curatorial or conservation work, and incorporated onto the Collections Management System. Museum staff see and use many items on a daily basis and should record information on the object's location, the date it was seen and by whom.

2.14 In practice, we found that the Museum's central programme of verification of its collection is through 'audit by use'. As part of its work to prioritise the inventory and computerisation of records for new items, items on display, items on loan, or items of high financial or scientific value (see paragraph 2.8), the Museum has verified the physical location of 1.1 million items (23 per cent of the collection) over the past five years. High risk items on display are also checked regularly by museum assistants. In this way, the Museum is concentrating on the areas it considers to be of most risk and importance. Indeed, the Museum may have verified a higher proportion of its collection as Museum staff told us that not all of the items seen through 'audit by use' are recorded because of the time implications of doing so.

2.15 On spot checking, we found that, in practice, spot checks are carried out every four months, which is more frequent than the required twelve months. As a result, the Museum anticipates that it will have verified all items in some collections by 2006 through its regular spot checking. However, because items are mainly selected from records held on the Collections Management System, along with those within the Biology department and the Library, other items not held on these computerised recording systems are rarely part of this process.

2.16 In 2002-03, the National Audit Office Wales carried out spot checks on a small sample of items across a range of departments (on display and in storage areas), based on computerised and manual records. All the items were located where the records indicated they should be. Despite this encouraging result, this does not mean that there is no risk to the physical security of the collections. For example, we noted during our testing that some manual records are not always amended to include an item's location and, in most cases, the location records for items with only manual records are kept separately on lists and indexes. Although the Museum holds all the information required, keeping the information in this way means that not every manual record is complete. The Museum told us that it takes assurance from the audit testing undertaken by the Museum's internal auditors and by the National Audit Office as part of our external audit of the Museum. However, the sample size of any such testing is small as such checks are intended to test the Museum's own controls and procedures and are not intended to substitute for the Museum's own verification checks on its collections.

2.17 The Museum's limited spot checks are not an alternative for properly planned systematic verification arrangements whereby entire collections are verified over a period of time. Even multiple spot checks cannot provide the comprehensive assurance of the presence and whereabouts of all items in the way that a full systematic audit can. Only when the entire collection has been inventoried does the Museum intend to begin a full rolling programme of systematic verification encompassing every item, which it proposes to carry out every three years. In the meantime, the Museum would improve its verification arrangements if it extended its spot checks to those items, currently two thirds of the collection, held only on manual records.

KEY POINTS

on physical verification:

- The Museum's verification arrangements to check the physical presence, condition and location of items focus on items that are being inventoried and recorded on computer: new items, items on display, items on loan, or items of high financial or scientific value. The Museum also undertakes spot checks of items selected from its computerised records. Whilst these are likely to be the items of most value and most at risk, they account for only a third of the Museum's collection.
- The Museum does not currently have systematic verification arrangements whereby the items within the entire collection are verified over a period of time. It considers that its ability to undertake systematic verification is hindered by the backlog in computerising its records, and intends verifying the entire collection only once full computerisation is complete.
- There is therefore some risk to the security of Museum objects not yet on the computerised systems, although these are likely to be lower value items and lower risk items that are not on public display.

Recommendation:

- The Museum should extend its spot checks, designed to test the condition and location of items within its collection, to include the items held only on manual records.



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3 Storage and conservation

Good storage and conditions are essential to preserve the quality of the collections

- 3.1 Good storage and environmental conditions are a fundamental part of *preventative conservation* work to minimise the deterioration of items in the Museum's collection. *Remedial conservation* involves treating deteriorating items to improve their condition in order to stabilise or enhance their cultural or scientific value. Unsatisfactory storage not only prevents access to the collections and puts objects at the risk of deterioration but can negate expensive conservation work already carried out. The Museum has consciously moved from the revenue-intensive remedial conservation to less interventionist means such as improving storage, packaging and environmental conditions on the basis that, although it can demand a higher initial capital outlay, it is cheaper in revenue terms.
- 3.2 This part of the report examines the Museum's performance in appropriately storing and conserving the items in its collection, in particular:
- the quality and quantity of storage facilities;
 - the condition of the Museum's collection; and
 - the important related issue of collection growth.

We found that the Museum has a backlog in its conservation work and some 43 per cent of the Museum's storage by area is, at best, poor. The Museum is taking action that it believes will solve storage problems for 15-20 years, from 2007 onwards.

The quality of storage at the Museum has improved following recent investment

- 3.3 There are no widely-recognised standards for museum storage as different collections require different levels of care. In 1996, the Museum assessed 71 per cent of its storage as being of poor quality (using its own definitions³). Since then, it has spent some £8 million across its sites upgrading and increasing storage facilities, in particular it has:

- acquired the Collections Centre at Nantgarw;



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- created new storage and display areas and the reconstruction of the kitchen in the castle at the Museum of Welsh Life;



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³ Very good - of international/national standard; good - acceptable within national standards; poor - not meeting acceptable national standards; very poor - not meeting general museum standards.

- rationalised and refurbished existing space, improving environmental conditions and standards of conservation, such as the refurbishment of St Fagans castle at the Museum of Welsh Life; and
- enhanced storage conditions within existing stores, such as new roller racking and environmental control in the geology archives and improved a furniture store at the Museum of Welsh Life with new racking.

3.4 The Nantgarw site was acquired in 1998, to house the Museum's Industrial and Maritime collection, with funds secured from the sale of the Museum's site in Cardiff Bay. The quality of storage at the Nantgarw Collections Centre is high with 95 per cent of the Museum's collection at Nantgarw stored in rooms where conditions meet the recommended conservation requirements (very good quality) (see **Case study B below**). Security is an important element of the quality of storage. The Museum carries out security audits, prioritises the risks and arranges the relevant level of security with advice from the National Security Adviser at the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

B Nantgarw Collections Centre

One example of high quality storage in the Collections Centre is that of the paper items and maritime watercolours. These are protected by an inergen fire suppressant system. The Museum estimates that to provide such a system for those areas where other collections are held would cost approximately £3.4 million. Although this would be beneficial, the Museum recognises that it would not be affordable.

Despite improvements, there remains substantial scope to further enhance the quality of storage

3.5 Following the investment of the last few years, in 2001 the Museum classed 57 per cent of its storage as good or very good, compared with 29 per cent in 1996. Nonetheless, the external Quinquennial review of the Museum in 2001 noted that a large proportion of the collection was still being stored in unsatisfactory conditions and suggested that the Museum should review the level of resources dedicated to storage. **Figure 8** shows the quality of the Museum's storage compared with other respondees to our survey⁴. This, however, can only be indicative as there are no standard criteria applied across the museums and galleries sector to assess the quality of storage.

8 Quality of storage space

| | % Storage space which is good or very good (by area) | Collection size ¹ (millions of items) |
|--|--|--|
| Museum Victoria, Australia | 100 | 16 |
| The Natural History Museum | 95 | 70.5 |
| National Portrait Gallery | 75 | 0.25 |
| British Museum | 71 | 6.9 |
| National Museums and Galleries of Wales | 57 | 4.7 |
| Victoria and Albert Museum | 46 | 4.34 |
| National Museums Liverpool | 44 | 3.1 |
| Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery | 30 | 0.75 |

NOTES

- 1 Figures may only indicate grouped specimens rather than individual items.
- 2 Some museums have or are improving the quality of their storage space through significant capital investment (see paragraph 3.15 and Case Study 10).

Source: National Audit Office Wales Survey 2002-03

⁴ Using the Museum's own definitions.

- 3.6 The Museum is currently preparing a detailed assessment of what will be moved to the Nantgarw Collections Centre. The industrial collection will remain at Nantgarw, with the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea, opening in 2005, showing a selection of the full collection at any one time. The Centre also holds corporate archives and audio tapes. A number of objects are stored in the open air on the external site behind the Nantgarw Collections Centre due to a lack of space inside, including a fireless locomotive, an early 19th century anchor, four navigation buoys, a railway footbridge, a signal gantry, a coal cutter and millstones. Although such items represent only one per cent of the total industrial 3-D object collection, and some were designed to be in the open air, they are subject to decay by the elements.
- 3.7 The Museum currently assesses some 43 per cent of its storage space as poor (21 per cent) or very poor (22 per cent). Only a small proportion of the collection has the special environmental conditions that some of it requires. During our fieldwork, departments told us that storage was their biggest problem. From our examination of the Museum's storage space, we observed that the main problems were:
- a lack of racking, or suitable racking, endangering items and sometimes wasting valuable floor space;
 - inappropriate storage units, such as units that are the wrong size or made of material liable to damage its contents;
 - insufficient room for staff to carry out work on items; and
 - a lack of environmental controls such as air conditioning.

Some of the particular storage problems experienced by the Museum are set out in **Case studies C to H opposite**.

C

Archaeology and Numismatics:
inappropriate storage

Less than half the archaeology and numismatics collection is stored at the appropriate standards. A lack of appropriate display and storage space has led to the use of a sub-basement which not only floods threatening the items stored therein (3 per cent of the archaeology collection) but creates high humidity affecting the items stored on the floor above it. The National Lapidarium, stored in the sub-basement comprises: quernstones (pre-historic, Roman and medieval), Roman mosaics, Roman inscriptions and sculptured stone, Roman brick and tile, medieval carved stonework and architectural stonework of all periods.



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D The National Herbarium: lack of space in storage area

The National Herbarium, which is part of the department of Biodiversity and Systematic Biology, is currently housed in an area which is overcrowded, does not provide adequate environmental control and threatens the collection through crushing of the specimens. It is not safely accessible to visitors and precludes further expansion. Documentation and conservation of the 250,000 specimens is made difficult due to the overcrowding, lack of working space for curators and the over full cabinets. Consequently it is not possible to make the biodiversity data contained in the herbarium to potential users. Current estimates for replacing the old cabinets, installing efficient compact roller racking and supplying a minimum satisfactory working environment are in the region of £250,000 which is based on the standards of current storage used in Kew Gardens and the Natural History Museum.



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E The Library: inadequate conditions

The Library has a collection of 195,000 books but it does not advertise itself as a public library due to limited space available for the public to use books under supervised conditions. It does advertise the books it holds on the web, and public access is generally by appointment. Most books are held with individual departments who are their prime users.

The Librarian estimates that only 15 per cent of the collection is stored in the ideal conditions for a library. Of the remaining 85 per cent, approximately 70 per cent is estimated to be in what could be termed a stable environment. Even in the rooms which have been adapted with racking for storage, the floor is not strong enough for the racking to extend to the full height of the room. In other rooms, there is some concern over the safety of the higher racking units.

F Museum of Welsh Life: unsafe and inconvenient storage

Numerous important items from the social and cultural history and agriculture are displayed in 48 cases behind panes of glass dating from as far back as 1969. The cases are not considered safe enough for staff to open (they are designed so that the entire pane glass must be removed to access the interior). Each time items are required from the cases for conservation, inspection, photography or outward loan, professional glaziers have had to be called out to remove and replace the glass at a cost of £150 to £200 a time.

G Geology department: poor environmental conditions

In the geology department, the fluctuating environmental conditions in the storage areas are detrimental to the collection. The Museum has found asbestos in the sub-basement where all bore hole cores are kept, thus putting this area out of use. Routine conservation would stabilise the condition of items but the department considers that it only has sufficient staff resources to conserve the "worst" items.



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H Storage issues at the Museum of Welsh Life

The Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans has experienced a number of acute storage problems:

- many storage areas are crammed full to the point that items cannot be accessed by staff;
- one storage building was in such a bad condition following water ingress that a member of staff fell through the floor;
- the shelving in some storage sheds for agricultural machinery is so unstable that staff are unable to access items due to safety fears;
- many items are stored in corridors creating emergency access problems;
- an excessive amount of furniture is stored in the castle attic creating a fire hazard; and
- one furniture store has high shelving and no lift facilities putting staff at risk and limiting access to some items.



3.8 Ultimately, poor storage conditions can result in items deteriorating to such an extent that they are irreparably damaged, as illustrated in **Case study I**.

I Examples of the Museum suffering losses through poor storage

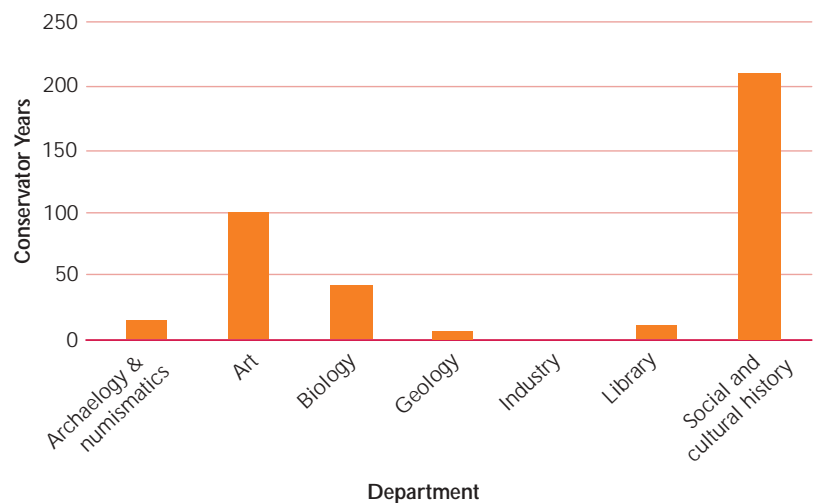
- Two boats valued at some £500 each were stored in the open air at the Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans. Whilst there, they were damaged beyond repair by a falling tree in a storm and were subsequently de-accessioned (ie removed from the collection, see paragraph 3.11).
- A boat valued at £5,000 suffered extensive fire damage at the warehouse in which it was stored. The boat was de-accessioned on the grounds of irreparable damage.

The Museum is struggling to overcome the significant backlog of work required to stabilise the condition of its collection

3.9 The Museum acknowledges that it faces a backlog of conservation work, with items in poor condition that cannot be put on display or used for research purposes. The Museum's estimate of the amount of conservation required, by department, to make the collections stable is shown in **Figure 9**. The overall estimate equates to approximately 20 conservation staff spending the next 20 years addressing the backlog - a total of 384 staff years at current staffing levels. Domestic and rural life has the largest estimated backlog, reflecting the substantial impact of the very poor standard of much of its storage facilities. The items on open display in houses at the Museum of Welsh Life are suffering increased wear and tear through the increase in visitor numbers.

9 Conservation backlog

The Museum estimates that it would take 384 conservator years to overcome the existing conservation backlog.



NOTE

There is no estimate for the industry department.

Source: *The Museum*

3.10 The Museum has sought to reduce these conservation problems by increasing the resources dedicated to conservation in recent years. The number of conservation staff has increased from six staff at a cost of £81,500 in 1990-91 to 30 staff at a cost of £796,000 in 2003-04. Although the Museum acknowledges the backlog, most departments do not have the resources to tackle the backlog of remedial conservation work. An internal review of conservation at the Museum, completed in 2002, concluded that there were deficiencies in the Museum's conservation arrangements compounded by the lack of storage space. For example, items were being stored in workshops which were unsuitable for conservation work. Aside from the art studios, all conservation facilities are poor and generally cramped.

3.12 To cease accessioning for a period, say until conservation and curation backlogs were resolved and storage was optimum for each item would mean that the opportunity to acquire certain items during that period would be missed. The Museum therefore has to strike a balance between accessioning according to its policy and making sure that items that ought to be held in Wales are not lost forever. For example, to prevent a large proportion of the collection held by the Arts Council of Wales leaving Wales, in 2001-02 the Museum accessioned the items, despite the overall lack of good quality storage space. The Museum has a presumption against de-accessioning or disposal; its collections are its main assets. **Figure 10** shows that, in 2002-03, more than 500 items were accessioned for every one de-accessioned.

The natural tendency for the size of the Museum's collection to grow has knock on effects on storage and conservation needs

3.11 The size of the Museum's collections can increase through a number of means, including bequest, purchase, and the acceptance in lieu scheme⁵. The 1996 Treasure Act also allows for finds to be passed to the Museum. When ownership of an item passes to the Museum, the item is said to have been accessioned into the collection. An item may be de-accessioned if it is removed from the collection, for instance because there has been a reappraisal of the value of the object and is thus unwanted, its condition has deteriorated, or it is hazardous. However, growth in the size of the collection results in increased storage and conservation needs. The Museum carries out an impact assessment for the majority of its accessions of its ability to ensure adequate control of storage, curation, conservation, finance, professional expertise and other factors essential to good collections management.

10 Items accessioned and de-accessioned

The Museum has a presumption against de-accessioning and disposing of items in its collections.

| Year | Number of items accessioned | Numbers of items de-accessioned |
|-----------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1999-2000 | 26,928 | 6 |
| 2000-01 | 78,422 | 162 |
| 2001-02 | 20,170 | 212 |
| 2002-03 | 35,096 | 64 |

NOTE

An item may be de-accessioned if there has been a re-appraisal of the 'worth' of the object and it is thus unwanted, if the item has deteriorated or is a hazard to health, or if the item has to be written off.

Source: The Museum

⁵ The National Heritage Act 1980 and the Inheritance Tax Act 1984 empowers the Commissioners of Inland Revenue to accept certain property in whole or in part satisfaction of inheritance tax and any interest thereon.

11 Items accessioned and de-accessioned

| Museum | Estimated annual growth in collection (%) | Estimated annual growth in collection (number of objects) | Collection size (millions of items) |
|--|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| National Museums & Galleries of Northern Ireland | 1 | 15,000 | 1.5 |
| National Museums and Galleries of Wales | 0.85 | 39,950 | 4.7 |
| Victoria and Albert Museum | 0.4 | 17,360 | 4.34 |
| Science Museum London | 0.25 | 800 | 0.32* |
| The Natural History Museum | 0.2 | 141,000 | 70.5 |
| British Museum | 0.1 | 6,900 | 6.9 |
| Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery | 0.1 | 750 | 0.75 |
| National Museums Liverpool | 0.03 | 930 | 3.1 |

* Artefacts only.

Source: National Audit Office Wales Survey 2002-03

3.13 An estimate of the amount of collection growth is useful information for resource planning. Although, as **Figure 11** shows, a number of other museums have sought to make estimates of the expected annual growth in their collection size, the Museum has not routinely attempted to do so, although as part of planning the Nantgarw extension, it has estimated the amount of storage space that will be required. This suggests an annual increase in storage requirements of 450 cubic metres, or 1.6 per cent. Using the information in Figure 10 overleaf, and based on a collection size of 4.7 million items, the annual increase in the size of the collection has varied from 0.4 to 1.7 per cent over the last four years. On average, it is 0.85 per cent. This is significantly higher than the annual increase at six of the eight museums surveyed by the National Audit Office Wales. However, the growth in collection will depend on the remit of the museum in question. The Museum recognises that collection growth is an issue and has, for example, agreed informal protocols with the National Library of Wales to avoid duplication.

3.14 While disposal has the benefit of releasing space and may raise revenue through sales, it needs to be carefully controlled to manage the risk of losing items which may subsequently prove to have been worthwhile retaining. In the past, items have been

disposed of by museums because they were no longer fashionable or because they had been imperfectly understood. In respect of the latter, technical developments may allow better understanding as time goes by. The Museum was part of a UK-wide working party (the National Museums Directors' Conference⁶) which reported in 2003 on how best to achieve the right balance in disposing of items⁷. This report emphasised that museums should be willing to dispose of objects when that would better ensure their preservation or ensure that they would be more widely used and enjoyed: disposal should accordingly be regarded as a proper part of collections management.

The Museum has developed investment plans to improve storage and tackle the conservation backlog

3.15 The Museum's conservation review in 2002 concluded that the best way of addressing the deficiencies in its conservation arrangements would be to create a Department of Conservation and Analytical Services and to establish a conservation facility to serve the whole museum and eventually, other museums in Wales. This conservation facility would be an extension of the current Nantgarw Collections Centre and would also provide extra storage space. Such centralised collections centres exist in other museums for example:

⁶ *The National Museum Directors' Conference represents the leaders of the national museums and galleries in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the three national libraries, and the National Archives.*

⁷ *The National Museum Directors' Conference, Too Much Stuff? - Disposal from Museums, 2003.*

- the Natural History Museum opened the first phase of its Darwin Centre housing 22 million zoological collections in September 2002. Phase 2 is set to house the 33 million specimens of the botanical and entomological collections. At a total cost of £31 million, the centre will provide research and display space and will enable behind the scenes tours for visitors where they can hear presentations from researchers; and
- the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery has completed the first phase of a two-phase capital project, costing £4.1 million, to bring its collections from off site storage to a collections centre which will provide accessible storage and learning facilities. They are now into the second phase of the project, which includes the construction of an extension and refurbishment of existing warehouse space for collection storage.

As part of our fieldwork, we visited the National Museums Liverpool where they have also established such a facility. The £1.2 million improvements to the main collection storage facilities there were completed in 1999 and the wider benefits delivered by the whole project are described in **Case study J**.

3.16 The Museum's plans for improving its conservation and storage facilities at the Nantgarw Collections Centre and other sites are intended to enable the upgrading of other display and storage areas by freeing up space elsewhere and to provide public access to conservation activities. The Museum anticipates that the extension of the Centre will solve its storage problems for 15-20 years and will provide:

- an area for open-access storage;
- conservation suites;
- appropriate environmental conditions;
- better storage for those items currently housed in poor quality areas and room for collection growth;
- greater public access not just for items being moved to Nantgarw but by freeing up gallery space currently in use for storage; and
- space and services necessary to build on the loans programme and improve conservation.

3.17 The Museum is currently assessing how best to use the £3.5 million of funding committed by the Assembly to lever in additional funding, so as to improve the storage of its collections, whilst also improving the public access to them. However, it is unlikely that these planned improvements will be completed before 2007.

J

The National Museums Liverpool

The new space provides improved storage for parts of the collection, and the space to research and prepare items for display. New storage facilities will also be created in the expanded Liverpool Museum building itself to house over a million science reference specimens. The project will deliver:

- £40 million investment in three Grade II* listed buildings and 16,000 square metres of refurbished historic buildings;
- 30,000 objects and works of art brought out of storage and over 300,000 artefacts re-housed;
- custom-built storage and access facilities, almost doubling storage space;
- 8,000 square metres of galleries restored to public use and improved facilities for disabled users; and
- closely monitored and controlled environmental conditions.

At the Conservation Centre, visitors can see conservation work being undertaken, take part in a hands-on activity or a behind-the-scenes tour, and use an audio guide to take a personal tour round an interactive exhibition that illustrates museum conservation work.



© National Museums Liverpool

KEY POINTS

on storage and conservation of the collections:

- The Museum has a significant backlog in its conservation work to restore objects to a good condition. The Museum estimates that it would take a minimum of 384 staff years to overcome this backlog. The size of the backlog is not being significantly reduced by the efforts currently being made.
- Some 57 per cent of the Museum's storage by area is classed as good or very good mainly due to the acquisition of the Nantgarw Collections Centre in 1998. However, 43 per cent remains, at best, poor, threatening to damage the items stored.
- The natural tendency is for the size of collections in museums to grow, with knock on effects on storage and conservation needs. The annual rate of growth of the collection at the Museum is higher than most of the similar institutions surveyed by the National Audit Office Wales.
- The Museum estimates that the improved storage in the Nantgarw Collections Centre and other sites will solve storage problems - in terms of quality and quantity - for 15-20 years. However, these new facilities will not be available until 2007 at the earliest.

Recommendations:

- The Museum should formulate an action plan with timescales and costings of how it will seek to address the conservation backlog, taking into account the planned improvements in storage at the Nantgarw Collections Centre and other sites and the resources required to finance this.
- The Museum should use the impact assessment currently undertaken at the point of acquisition to inform its planning for the future growth of the collections.
- The Museum should, with some urgency, complete its assessment of how best to use the funding committed by the Assembly, to lever in additional external funding, so as to improve the storage of its collections.
- Given the growing nature of the collection, the Museum should periodically revisit its planning assumptions to ensure that they remain robust. Furthermore, the Museum should formulate an action plan with timescales and costings of how it will seek to address storage problems beyond the 15-20 years that the planned improved storage facilities might cater for.



© National Museum of Wales

Improving access to the Museum's collections

4

Access to items in the Museum's collections is key to achieving its aims, but is hampered by curation and conservation backlogs

- 4.1 Management of the Museum's collections involves a balance between the conservation, care and security of significant items for future and present generations, and enabling access to allow the enjoyment of items for research and educational purposes. Access incorporates both facilitating physical proximity to objects owned by the Museum, and enabling the intellectual use of information held concerning them. This part of the report examines the Museum's performance in facilitating access to the collections, in particular the proportion of the Museum's collections on public display, attracting visitors; and the management of the Museum's loans programme.
- 4.2 We found that despite the Museum only being able to display a limited proportion of its collection, it seeks to ensure that all items are accessible upon request. However, attempts to maximise the proportion of the collection on display are hindered by a lack of display space, as well as the backlog in documentation and curation. There has been a significant increase in visitor numbers following free entry and the Museum is seeking to extend its loans programme in the interests of releasing space and broadening access.

Much of the collection is not on display to the public, but the Museum has other ways of facilitating public access

- 4.3 Current Museum figures indicate that less than one per cent of the collections are physically on display. In practice the figure will vary between the individual museums and within the Museum over time according to how much space is available for display purposes and the nature of the collection. The current capital developments at Big Pit,

Dre-fach and the Waterfront Museum will add significantly to the display area available to the Museum. At Swansea, a display refreshment programme is planned whereby a proportion of the items on display will be changed every year.

- 4.4 The main reasons why the Museum does not display items are that:

- some items, particularly in the science and archaeology departments, are held for scientific interest or research purposes only. For example, there may be 6,000 fossils of which six are on display; the others, very similar but scientifically different, are not displayed as to have 6,000 of virtually the same thing on display would add little value;
- some items are held for posterity, for example, rock samples from the present day are held so that future rock samples can be compared;
- some items form part of reserve collections so that displays can be rotated and conservation work can be carried out; and
- some items are too fragile to be on display or if they are, can only be placed on display for a short time, such as watercolours which would be adversely affected by light.

- 4.5 **Figure 12** shows that the Museum has a lower proportion of items on display than a number of potential comparator institutions, but also that it has a larger collection size and a lower proportion of space available to display items than several other institutions.

- 4.6 The Museum does not have a robust estimate of the proportion of its collection never intended for public display, but considers that a significant majority of items would fall into this category - as much as 4 million of its 4.7 million objects (some 85 per cent) including the overwhelming bulk of the science and archaeology collections.

© National Museum of Wales



12 Number and Proportions of collections on display and display space

| Museum | Number of items physically on display | Percentage of items physically on display (%) | Proportion of museum area which is for public display (%) | Collection size (millions of items) |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| Victoria and Albert Museum | 114,000 | 2.6 | 32 | 4.34 |
| British Museum | 48,300 | 0.7 | 36 | 6.9 |
| National Museums and Galleries of Wales | 26,790 | 0.57 | 21.3 | 4.7 |
| National Museums Liverpool | 26,350 | 0.85 | 25 | 3.1 |
| Museum Victoria, Australia | 16,000 | 0.1 | 17 | 16 |
| National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian, USA | 2,500 | 5 | 20 | 0.05 |

Source: National Audit Office Wales survey 2002-03

- 4.7 At the Museum, those items not held on open display can be seen by the public on request, although this fact could be better publicised - for example, the Museum does not make this clear on its web-site. In the year October 2002 to September 2003 there were 1,636 requests to see items not on display, all of which were met.
- 4.8 One way of improving access where there is a lack of physical space is to increase the amount of the collection accessible electronically (as illustrated in Case studies K and L). The Museum has made considerable efforts in recent years to improve access in this way. There is currently electronic access to 12.3 per cent of the Museum's collection, which (as shown in Figure 13) is a high percentage compared with the other respondents to our survey. The Museum aims to increase the proportion of its collection interpreted electronically, but it has so far not set targets for improvement in terms of getting more items physically on display.

The Museum has shorter opening hours than other institutions but hopes to extend these in the future

- 4.9 The Museum's opening hours average 42 hours a week (although its most popular site, the Museum of Welsh Life, opens for 49 hours a week), less than most of the museums that responded to our survey (Figure 14). The latest that any of the Museum's sites are open is 5pm and, until recently, the staff cost of opening in the evening was deemed to be prohibitive by the Museum. However, following a pay and grading review, the Museum believes it may now be in a position to open longer if funding could be identified to support such a proposal. Evening opening is a commonly used approach by many museums to attract additional visitors, as illustrated in Case study M. However, the success of evening opening is often dependent upon the location of the museum and the potential numbers of visitors in the locality.

K Ancient Wales

The Museum's archaeology and numismatics department produced a CD ROM called 'Ancient Wales'. This was sent to all schools, enabling pupils to see what items have been found near where they live.

The Museum also contributes to the National Biodiversity Network, which will create on-line access to environmental information at national and local level, and to the National Inventory of European Paintings which will make information on old master paintings available on-line.

L Gathering the Jewels

A total of 172 separate heritage institutions across Wales, including the Museum and the National Library of Wales came together to form a consortium (now registered as a limited company) and, in 2000, was awarded just over £1 million in lottery funding from the New Opportunities Fund. The 'Gathering the Jewels' project aims to digitise over 20,000 images of cultural heritage material which is held in institutions all over Wales, and to bring those images together as part of a single web-site which will become a new national learning resource. It includes materials held in Welsh libraries, museums and archives, and 2,000 images of items in the Museum's collections.

M Opening hours⁸

Since 2000, the **Victoria and Albert Museum** has extended its arrangements for late opening. It had opened on Wednesday evenings since the late 1980's, initially as "V&A Club". From May 2000 it has stayed open for everyone until 10pm on Wednesday. From June 2000 there have been additional late view sessions on one Friday per month. The Friday evenings aim to attract a younger audience - offering music, lectures, films, and other events, for some of which there may be a charge.

The **Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York** stays open until 9pm on Fridays and Saturdays. The Museum considers that this has attracted more working people and parents and has contributed significantly to the rise in visitor numbers throughout the 1990s.

The **National Museums of Scotland** introduced late evening opening in 1995. The Royal Museum and Museum of Scotland remains open until 8pm on a Tuesday evening.

13 Electronic access to collections

| Museum | Percentage of items interpreted electronically (%) | Collection size (millions of items) |
|--|--|-------------------------------------|
| Victoria and Albert Museum | 16.2 | 4.34 |
| National Museums and Galleries of Wales | 12.3 | 4.7 |
| National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian, USA | 2 | 0.05 |
| Science Museum London | 1.7 | 0.32* |
| National Museums & Galleries of Northern Ireland | 1 | 1.5 |
| Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery | 0.6 | 0.75 |

*Artefacts only.

Source: National Audit Office Wales survey 2002-03

14 Museum opening hours

| Museum | Number of hours open a week ¹ |
|--|--|
| National Portrait Gallery | 60 |
| British Museum | 58.30 |
| National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian, USA | 56 |
| Science Museum London | 56 |
| National Museums & Galleries of Northern Ireland | 55.30 |
| The Natural History Museum | 53.50 |
| Victoria and Albert Museum | 51.30 |
| Museum Victoria, Australia | 49 |
| National Museums Liverpool | 47 |
| National Museums and Galleries of Wales | 42 |

NOTES

- 1 These times may differ over Bank Holidays, seasons or for different sites of the museums.
- 2 The above figures are an average for multi sites museums. The National Museums and Galleries of Wales has some sites that are open 49 hours a weeks, such as the Museum of Welsh Life and Big Pit.

Source: National Audit Office Wales survey 2002-03

Visitor numbers have increased since the introduction of free entry to the Museum in April 2001

4.10 Entrance to all the Museum's sites, except for specific touring or temporary exhibitions, has been free for all since April 2001. Visitor numbers increased by 87 per cent after free entry was introduced in 2001-02 attracting over 1.4 million in that year. In 2002-03 the museum attracted nearly 1.3 million visitors. In seeking to maximise the impact of free admission, the Museum has drawn up a marketing and branding strategy, encompassing the branding of each site with the aim of inspiring visitors to one site to visit another, and of attracting visits from specific socio-economic groups and new market segments. Museums use a range of means to attract visitors including behind the scenes tours and activities targeted at specific areas of the community, as illustrated by **Case study N**.

N Targeting audiences

The Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery has a record of engaging audiences from long established projects such as the Asian Women's Textile Group now in its 10th year, to *Represent* (engaging disadvantaged 18-25 year olds), *Invisible Women* (partnership with South Birmingham College to provide a media communications course relating to culture and history), *Black Pasts Birmingham Futures* (partnership with University and Libraries to develop resources in black history, including collection mapping, publications, education resources and exhibitions). The events and activities programme provides a range of family and adult activities at weekends and during holidays. Special events such as sleepovers and Singles Nights are designed to attract new audiences and community consultation is an important part of the development of services.

The Victoria and Albert Museum promotes diversity in many ways, including dedicated posts for some cultural communities, for disabled users and for social inclusion. Events and programmes are designed with one or more of these groups in mind. There are a wide-ranging "Family Programmes" which comprise activity backpacks, family activity carts, performances, workshops, storytelling and art and craft activities. The Theatre Museum and Museum of Childhood run Saturday morning kids' club. An overarching programme such as is regularly run for Black History Month will offer something for different groups, from academic conferences to childrens artworks. The Audience Development Strategy is underpinned by market research, audience evaluations and visitor (and non-visitor) research that help the V&A to understand its audience. And recently, by a branding campaign that aimed to position the V&A as a contemporary, lively and relevant institution where everyone can find enjoyment and inspiration.

4.11 The Museum fully supports the Assembly's social inclusion agenda, and specifically the requirement to target social need. In developing new strategies appropriate to the needs of these new audiences, the Museum believes this may lead to a strategy of engaging smaller, more targeted audiences with discrete areas of the collections that are relevant to those groups. Examples of where the Museum has been working to improve access to the wider socio-economic and differing age groups are set out in **Case study O**.

O The National Museums and Galleries of Wales targeting a wider audience

The National Museums and Galleries of Wales targets young visitors through its **Glanely Gallery**, based at its Cathays Park site in Cardiff. It is an interactive resource promoting access to the Museum's collections through hands-on exploration. As well as handling real specimens, visitors can make use of video microscopes, computer resources and other reference material to further investigate the collections.

Tea and Talking points: is a series of talks being offered at the Museum specifically for older visitors, who either have never visited the Museum, or have not done so in recent years. In the run up to the start of the series, Museum staff have visited residential homes and older people's groups, to offer taster sessions and to promote the Tea and Talking points initiative.

Wales and the World Festival: This event directly targeted ethnic groups in Cardiff in an attempt to break down barriers and convince traditional non-visitors that the Museum, its collections and work are of interest and relevance to all sections of the community. The festivals included: Ghanaian drumming workshop and dance performance; Arabic community to perform fashion show and song; Swansea Filipino Community Dance Group to perform Filipino National dance; India & Somalia Henna tattoos; Storytelling about the Hindu Deities; Bernard Leach inspired Japanese ceramics plate painting workshop; Indian dancing; Welsh Music and Clog dancing; Chinese poetry recital; and a fashion show, poetry and traditional music and dance of Bangladesh. The weekend attracted over 2,000 visitors, including many visitors from a variety of different cultural and ethnic groups.

The Museum recently carried out a pan-Wales pilot exercise developing interest in visiting museums by disenfranchised young people. The **'On Common Ground'** programme was grant-aided by the Heritage Lottery Fund and others, and involved four communities across Wales. Participants in this programme developed their own unique approach to introduce their peers to museums and other heritage attractions. Their work was then displayed in the Main Hall in the Museum at Cathays Park during August 2003, where it was seen by 25,000 visitors. One of the most successful projects was the Wheel of Culture exhibition which was produced by a group of South Asian young people in Swansea. The display has been widely toured and won the Lord Mayor's award for City Regeneration.

Source: National Audit Office Wales survey and fieldwork

4.12 As with the other museums that responded to our survey, the Museum is carrying out research to inform the marketing strategy in terms of non-visitor research, audience development and maintaining the momentum of increased visitor numbers at above one million. Exit surveys have been carried out and developed over time. Results suggest success in terms of expanding the visitor profile to a greater age and social range and that visitors were more likely to return in 2001 than in 1998 and they were more likely to visit more sites than they did previously. The Museum has established focus groups to advise on its marketing initiatives, products and services. The Museum is working with the Wales Tourist Board to develop a Cultural Tourism Strategy for Wales.

KEY POINTS

on physical and electronic access:

- The Museum acknowledges the difficulty in making its collections accessible whilst storage conditions remain poor in some areas and a backlog in curation exists, and this is a factor in prioritising items for curation.
- Although the Museum is only able to display a limited proportion of its collection, all items are accessible upon request. The Museum is taking action to improve accessibility by increasing electronic access to the collections.
- There has been a substantial increase in visitor numbers following free entry. The Museum has put in place initiatives to maintain and improve visitor figures. It has shorter opening hours than most similar institutions but has bid in the Corporate Plan for funds to extend opening hours at selected sites.

Recommendations:

- The Museum should publicise more widely the fact that all items are accessible upon request.
- The Museum should revise its targets to reflect its desire to increase the proportion of items physically on display, especially given the proposed improvements to storage space at the Nantgarw Collections Centre and other sites.
- The Museum should carry out research into optimum opening hours with a view to maximising visitor numbers. In the light of research into the likely demand for extended opening hours, it should consider carrying out a trial of alternative opening times.

The Museum has a successful loans programme but could be more proactive in extending this further

- 4.13 Loaning the Museum's items to other venues increases access to people in other parts of Wales, the UK and the world. Outward loans involve the temporary transfer of objects from the collection to either another institution or to an individual for use in research, education, exhibition publication or enhancing access. Inward loans involve loans to the Museum from other institutions or individuals for the same purposes. All requests for loans are considered against the need to ensure preservation and security of objects. Access to the Museum's collections can also be achieved through its loans programme.
- 4.14 Loans to a foreign venue have to be approved by the Museum's Council. For all display loans the Museum then sends out its conditions of loan document and draws up a contractual agreement. When a loan is approved, the Museum can specify the security and other conditions of the venue before the loan can be made. The Museum generally requests better environmental conditions for its items when they are loaned out than it is sometimes able to provide for its items in-house. All borrowing venues meet the cost of packaging and preparing items for loan, transport, insurance and couriers. All items are photographed before they leave the premises and many items, such as works of art, are accompanied by Museum staff for security reasons.
- 4.15 Until recently, the public were generally unaware of the extent of the loans programme, but over 25,000 items are on display across Wales and elsewhere. Information on loans is collated centrally and input onto the Collections Management System and reported as a Corporate Plan target as 'the number of venues to which loans have been made'. As at September 2003, 3,214 items were on loan to 120 institutions in Wales, 9,268 objects to 89 other venues in the UK and 13,239 items loaned internationally. Until recently, the Museum had not requested that the items' origin be acknowledged when, for example, items are loaned to National Trust properties. The Museum has now added two conditions to the standard conditions of loan in order to address this: loans from the Museum must now be acknowledged on the identification label and the Museum must be informed if the loan is removed from display.
- 4.16 The Museum has not been able to be as proactive in loaning items as it would have wished due to a lack of staff resources to seek opportunities and manage the loan process, but it does satisfy the majority of requests. The Museum's Quinquennial Review noted that the Museum had limited resources allocated to the loans programme. The Museum has one officer who manages all art department loans and other related activities. The Museum has estimated that curation and conservation staff spend between one and five per cent of their time on outward loans.

The Museum is developing Partnership Programmes to extend its loans programme

- 4.17 The Museum has been entering into partnerships with other museums and galleries to increase access to collections through loans. It loans to a number of venues throughout Wales and the UK on a regular basis and has built up a number of ongoing relationships. For example a number of items from the Museum's Gwen John exhibition were loaned to Tenby Museum between August and October 2001, attracting over 12,000 visitors. The Museum has worked with the National Botanic Garden of Wales in terms of research and supplying artworks to support displays, and part of the Museum's Sutherland Collection will be loaned on a long-term basis to the new Sutherland Centre in St David's when it is built.
- 4.18 In May 2002, the Assembly launched a formal Partnership Programme enabling objects from the Museum's collections to be seen around Wales. The Assembly provided funding of £50,000 in 2003-04 to the Council of Museums in Wales to improve environmental and security facilities at local museums in order that items from the national collections can be displayed. Three museums - Oriel Ynys Môn, Wrexham County Borough Museum and Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery - were chosen to pilot the partnership programme. The Museum has provided exhibitions for all three venues. It has been unable to secure additional funds from the Assembly to facilitate this programme so will continue from its existing resources.
- 4.19 The Outreach Collection - some 55,000 objects (largely made up of reserve collections, items specifically purchased or replicas) - is available to individuals in schools and communities (120,000 users each year). It provides the opportunity to use exhibits in the classroom that are normally available to them only on museum visits. The items include items for handling, preserved specimens, miniature exhibition cases, and mounted illustrations, works of art, videos, cassettes and charts. The Museum told us that no other museum in the UK has a comparable collection or makes such extensive use of objects for outreach purposes.

KEY POINTS

on the management of the Museum's loans programme:

- Outward loans serve to extend access and relieve pressure on available Museum space. The Museum has a successful outward loans programme but could be even more proactive in extending it if sufficient resources were made available.
- The launch in 2002 of the Partnership Programme has already enabled items from the Museum's collection to be seen by more people throughout Wales.

Recommendations:

- In the interests of improving access to the collections, the Museum should continue to find ways to extend the loans programme.
- The Museum should evaluate the achievements of the Partnership Programme in increasing access to its collections through loans to other museums, to inform how best to extend this Programme.

Appendix 1

Glossary of collections management terminology

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Accessioning | Entering formally to the collection, involving completion of an accession document and assignment of a unique accession number. |
| Cataloguing | The collection and ordering of data to create a definitive record of an object or collection that is more than the basic minimum information. Such information will include historical information about the object and references to published information. |
| Collection Impact Statement | A pre-accession documented evaluation for an individual specimen or group of objects. The document will also include a statement identifying the optimum level of care which will be required. |
| Conservation | Preventative conservation covers the measures necessary to minimise deterioration of items in the collection. Remedial conservation (restoration) involves a treatment to bring it to a more acceptable condition in order to stabilise or enhance its cultural or scientific value. |
| Curation | The process of enhancing the information held about an object, from basic-level information to catalogue level. |
| De-accessioning | Formally being removed from the collection. Items are de-accessioned if they are exchanged, given as a gift, sold or destroyed. |
| Display | Items are stored and interpreted in public areas. Items on display tend to be rotated to allow for routine conservation. An item may be stored in a display area or in another area of the Museum. |
| Documentation | Providing a basic record for an object, group or collection, involving the gathering of sufficient data to prove title to an object, identify and locate it. The documentation of all new specimens is done on the computerised Collections Management System. |
| Environmental conditions | The condition in which the collection is held in terms of temperature (such as air conditioning), humidity or light. |
| Inventory | The Museum's basic record, involving noting a unique number; museum storage location; ownership details and title; and locality. Additional information might include measurements, materials and descriptions. The Museum also defines 'inventory' as being held on computerised record. |
| Loans | Outward loans involve the temporary physical transfer of objects from the collection to either another institution or to individuals for use in research, education, exhibition publication or enhancing access. Inward loans involve loans to the Museum from other institutions or individuals for the same purposes. |
| Minimum basic standards | The basic standards of care required for any object will vary according to its nature and to its potential for the collections. Minimum basic standards will apply to documentation, conservation and storage, for example, but will differ from collection to collection. |
| Pre-inventory | Documentation held on an items that is not sufficient to qualify as inventory level. |
| Preservation | Passive, non-interventive physical care of an object which includes the provision of good storage, environmental control and security, sufficient that the natural decay of the object is slowed down as much as possible. |
| Registration | The minimum level of numbering and documentation undertaken by a department. |

Appendix 2

Relevant extracts from previous National Audit Office and Committee of Public Accounts reports

Previous relevant criticism

Source

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General: Department of the Environment and Welsh Office: Sponsorship of Non-Departmental Public Bodies, (HC 534, 1985-86).

Internal controls

The National Audit Office has drawn the Museum's attention in recent years to a number of weaknesses in internal control, including failure to maintain complete and up to date records of the collection assets (Appendix 8, paragraph 4.1).

Verification of collection assets

The National Audit Office has also repeatedly drawn the Museum's attention to the need for regular physical verification of its collection assets, which have a market value far in excess of their book value. ... In both 1984 and 1985 the NAO made limited test-checks of its own to verify the existence of collection items, and on each occasion the Museum was unable to trace a painting (Appendix 8 paragraph 4.2).

Source

Fifteenth Report from the Committee of Public Accounts 1986-87, Department of the Environment and Welsh Office: Sponsorship of Non-Departmental Public Bodies, May 1987.

The Museum told us that during the past two years it had undertaken a series of major steps to improve financial management. These included... the appointment of an internal auditor whose responsibilities include the physical verification of collection assets (paragraph 23).

Source

Treasury Minute on the Fifteenth Report from the Committee of Public Accounts 1986-87: Department of the Environment and Welsh Office: Sponsorship of the Non-Departmental Public Bodies, October 1987.

Action has been taken to improve the Museum's documentation of specimens and to overcome the problems of verification experienced in the past (paragraph 56).

Source

National Audit Office unpublished management report: National Museums and Galleries of Wales: Aspects of Collection Management, 1997.

Background

In response the National Museums and Galleries of Wales embarked on a number of actions to improve the management of their collections.the introduction in 1992 of a computerised collection management system (CMS) (paragraph 1.1) CMS is being introduced to all the curatorial departments on a rolling programme with a planned completion date of the year 2000 (paragraph 1.2).

The National Audit Office conclusions:

Verification Policy and Procedures

- Departments have introduced certain processes to address the physical verification of their collections. However, neither the Museum nor individual departments have formal written policies on the physical verification of items. This has meant that departments have developed procedures on an ad-hoc basis without any central monitoring (paragraph 2.14).
- In developing a strategy for physical verification the Museum needs to incorporate all their existing verification processes, but should also, as a priority, address risk areas and those of greatest importance (paragraph 2.15).

continued on next page

Previous relevant criticism

continued

Total number of collection items

- The Museum has recognised that the original estimate of the total number of items in their collections was based upon a mix of judgement and more accurate figures, however, there has been no central initiative to date to improve the figures... However, the Museum does need to improve the accuracy of the total figure over a period of time (paragraph 2.18).

Documentation (Computerised Management System)

- The Museum is making a concerted effort to input standard records for the Priority areas of the collections. However, the quality and level of the records being entered on to CMS varies significantly between departments (paragraph 4.19).
- CMS can be a useful collection management tool at all stages of record entry. At present the Museum is understandably committed to using it primarily as a tool for cataloguing high priority items. However, the Museum does not appear to have a strategy for tackling the backlog of the remainder of the collections which also need to be entered on to CMS (paragraph 4.22).

The National Audit Office recommendations:

- The Museum should produce a formal written policy for physical verification of the collections (paragraph 2.20).
- The Museum should ensure that a strategy for physical verification is in place, whilst allowing departments some flexibility in their approach. For some departments, with a large backlog of unverified items, the strategy for tackling the backlog should concentrate on the areas of risk and importance. (paragraph 2.21).

- The Museum should consider developing a performance indicator to assist in raising the profile of the work (paragraph 2.23).
- Departments should report the result of their verification exercises as part of the current performance reporting rounds (paragraph 2.22).
- Some departments have a large number of collection items and therefore a large backlog of physical verification. The NAO consider that these departments should develop a strategy for tackling the backlog. ...Such a strategy would need to concentrate on areas of risk and greatest importance to the departments and the Museum, to make the best use of the limited resources available to carry out such work (paragraph 2.6).
- The Museum should improve the accuracy of its assessments of the size of its collections (paragraph 2.24).
- The Museum should consider making more use of the Collections Management System than at present. For example, the Collections Management System could be used as a central record of the results of the various physical verification exercises which are undertaken (paragraph 4.25).
- The Museum should be developing a strategy to address the backlog of documenting the collections on to the Collections Management System (paragraph 4.26).

Appendix 3

National Audit Office Wales methodology

- 1 The National Audit Office Wales carried out work in four stages.
 - we visited all the departments of the Museum across a number of sites, interviewing the relevant curatorial staff and other senior managers, reviewing documentation and observing display, storage space and information management systems at first hand;
 - we carried out a survey in 2002-03 of other museums in the United Kingdom and overseas to establish comparative data and identify good practice;
 - we visited the National Museums Liverpool (formerly the National Museums and Galleries Merseyside) to benchmark the work of the Museum and to follow up issues arising from the survey; and
 - we interviewed the Museum's sponsor division at the Assembly.
- 2 The National Audit Office Wales took a sample of 25 items across the Museum's departments in order to verify their location and check location records (paragraph 2.16).
- 3 The survey was sent to a total of 26 museums, varying in size and discipline and ten responses were received from:

Museums in the United Kingdom

The Natural History Museum
 National Museums & Galleries of Northern Ireland
 British Museum
 National Museums Liverpool
 Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
 Science Museum London
 Victoria and Albert Museum
 National Portrait Gallery

Overseas museums

Museum Victoria, Australia
 National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian, USA

- 4 The survey asked museums at home and abroad about:
 - the size and condition of their collections, storage and display space;
 - loans, verification and records management procedures;
 - progress achieved in documenting collections to the various levels;
 - the extent of the collection publicly accessible and how this is achieved;
 - the initiatives being undertaken to increase visitor numbers, such as surveys, extended opening hours and targeted events;
 - the existence of collections management policies and the frequency that these are updated; and
 - the staffing and resources available for the various aspects of collections management such as conservation, loan management and curation.