

## **Guidance Sheet 1**

# **Getting started for artists and creative businesses**

### **Summary**

Museums have much to offer to artists and creative businesses:

- places with rich potential as performance or display venues, or locations for filming
- their collections, which are a rich source of content and inspiration
- the knowledge of the staff who work in them
- a high degree of public trust and well-established audiences

Museums value the opportunity to work with the creative industries, for the fresh perspectives this offers and the chance to bring their work to new audiences.

Partners from the creative industries working with museums for the first time need to be aware that some of museums' responsibilities mean they have to work in particular ways:

- Museums have to protect their collections for the future, and to balance the public benefit of making the collections available with the risk that it brings.
- Museums want to generate income more effectively, but have to balance this with their role as public institutions, and have to prioritise the public interest and public accessibility.

To work together effectively, museums and the creative industries need to understand each other's approaches better. These guidance notes are a first step towards that.

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## 1 What do museums have to offer?

**Special places** There are more than 40 museums in Northern Ireland, and together they look after notable buildings. They preserve important houses, simple farm buildings and historic sites from courthouses and gaols to castles and railways. Some more recent museum buildings showcase the best of contemporary architecture. For film and TV companies looking for locations, and for performing arts organisations looking for new venues, museums offer unrivalled possibilities.

**Special things** Museums exist to bring people and collections together. They enable people to experience real things that are evidence of the past, to enjoy works of art, and to understand science and nature at first hand. Museums are always looking for new ways to use their collections, to enable more people to enjoy them, and to unlock more of their potential. Creative businesses from digital-media developers to musicians and makers can help to bring collections to new audiences, while growing their own businesses. Museum collections can be sources of inspiration for designers, artists, makers and other creative professionals.

**Special knowledge** People who work in museums have expert knowledge about the subjects they cover. They can tell stories which bring even the most unpromising-looking collections to life, and their expert knowledge adds depth and makes audiences think twice about subjects they thought they knew. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure of hearing museum curators talk in person about the collections they care for knows that there is a special magic in their expert knowledge. But too often much of that knowledge remains locked away and most museum users only get small glimpses of the richness of museums' expertise. Creative businesses could unlock that knowledge for broader audiences, through apps, e-learning resources, new kinds of publications, and broadcast media, creating new products for new markets and helping museums to realise the potential of their knowledge.

**Special relationships** The best museums have a special role at the heart of their local areas. Research shows that museums enjoy exceptionally high levels of public trust. For creative businesses, the opportunity to showcase work in a museum or to work together on a product or public programme, can bring your work to new audiences and give it a stronger resonance.

## 2 How might you work together?

**Museums as clients** Many creative businesses have worked for museum clients, contributing to displays, their marketing and their digital offer. However, some museums still have fairly traditional ideas about how to interpret their collections and engage with audiences. If you can offer solutions to museum problems within the constraints museums face, there are rich opportunities to grow your business in museums.

**Museums as service providers** Museums hold historic, artistic and scientific collections, which could offer inspiration for your work or designs to licence for your products. They look after special places, which have potential as film locations, or performing arts venues. The people who work in them are experts in subjects ranging from dinosaurs to William Scott from linen to DNA, as well as in the history of Northern Ireland. Many of these resources are still under-utilised as museums are just beginning to realise their commercial potential.

**Museums as collaborators** While museums and the creative industries have traditionally worked together as clients and service-providers, there is potential for new kinds of collaboration. Museums are rich sources of ideas and inspiration; they look after fabulous places and have knowledgeable staff. They have ready-made communities of users who can offer you new audiences and an outlet for your work. Working together could generate commercial and creative opportunities. In addition, there may be opportunities to apply for funding to work together to develop a programme or product, drawing on your specialist skills and museums' special resources. Guidance Sheet 3 in this series has more information about funding opportunities.

Licensing and product development offer other opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration: there is scope for developing commercial ranges based on museum collections, and museum shops offer potential outlets for smaller-scale producers. Guidance Sheets 3 and 4 offer more advice on how to develop successful partnerships.

### 3 More about museums

According to the official definition 'Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.' This means that their role is to bring people and collections together. Keeping collections safe and preserving them for the future is a core part of their work, but is not enough on its own – they also have to ensure that their collections are used and enjoyed.

The museum sector in Northern Ireland has 42 museums currently recognised under the Museum Accreditation Scheme, the UK standard for museums. All Accredited museums have to be public, not-for-profit institutions, and in Northern Ireland the sector comprises:

- National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI), which are directly funded by government, through the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
- Local museums, comprising those run by local government and a range of independent and voluntary-run museums (mostly constituted as charities)

The Northern Ireland Museums Council is the umbrella body for the local museums, and its website provides details on all museums in Northern Ireland.

People in the museum sector draw a distinction between museums and similar organisations, such as art galleries, historic buildings and heritage sites. For the sector, the distinction is that a museum has a *permanent collection* which it makes publicly available and cares for very long term. Some art galleries and historic buildings also care for collections, in which case they can apply to become an Accredited museum, but others do not. Much of the advice in these guidance sheets applies equally to the broader sector, but some of it applies particularly to organisations with responsibility for managing public collections.

## 4 Finding museum partners

The Northern Ireland Museums Council represents non-national museums and its website is the best starting point for finding museums in Northern Ireland: <http://www.nimc.co.uk/find-a-museum/>

The largest collections in Northern Ireland are those in the national museums. You can search their collections online: <http://nmni.com/Home/Online-Collections/>

To find museums with particular kinds of collections, some UK-wide listings can be useful:

- Cornucopia is a database listing museums and their collections and allows searching by collection type and postcode. Please be aware, however, that the database is far from complete and searches do not return comprehensive lists, but it can be a useful starting point if you want to find collections of a particular kind: [www.cornucopia.org.uk](http://www.cornucopia.org.uk)
- Culture Grid offers an alternative way of searching museum collections and its data can be re-used within other sites: [www.culturegrid.org.uk](http://www.culturegrid.org.uk)
- Culture 24 is a listings site for museums that includes news and reviews and is a good place to look for inspiration and a more informal insight into the work of museums: <http://www.culture24.org.uk/home>

## 5 What to expect when you work with museums

Museums are already working with the creative industries in a range of ways to bring their collections to wider audiences and to help people engage with them. Recent research for NIMC showed that while at the moment museums are most likely to be working with artists or people working in the areas of craft and design, they are increasingly interested in broadening out their work into the other areas of the creative industries.

Museums recognise the role that artists and creative businesses can play in increasing the use of their collections and helping more people to access and enjoy them. Museums that have already worked with the creative industries have all found the experience a positive one and something they would do again. One thing that museums value in particular from these collaborations and partnerships are the different perspectives they can produce, and the creativity it can bring out in people working in museums. These collaborations can also bring important skills sets into the museums that staff don't possess, but can learn from.

However, museums may not have a deep understanding of the different areas of the creative industries, and how businesses and individuals operate. They may be unsure about how to approach businesses or how to initiate work.

There are also some aspects of the way museums work that it may be useful to know about. Museums have some particular concerns that it can be helpful to try to understand, or at least acknowledge, before you start to work together, so you can find ways of overcoming them.

**Caring for collections** Museums want to find new ways of engaging people with their collections and getting them better used; however, they need to balance this with their role of caring for the collections for future generations. Museums have to consider how artefacts might be damaged by any use, as well as the benefits that would come from enabling more people to enjoy them. This could lead to a mismatch between what artists or creative businesses might want to do with collections and what is possible. Some objects in museum collections are vulnerable to damage by light, from changes in temperature and humidity, from dirt and pollution, from insects and other pests, or from accidental damage from handling. Some collections are more fragile than others - textiles and works on paper can be especially problematic. Museum partners will need to think about the physical needs of collections and may need to involve a specialist in collections care (often called a conservator) in deciding how collections can be used safely.

**Accessibility of collections and buildings** Museum buildings and collections are a public resource and museums have a responsibility to ensure that as many people as possible have opportunity to enjoy them. This means that museums will welcome projects which increase the visibility of their collections, but it also means that they may be cautious about projects which would reduce public access to them for any length of time - for example if galleries need to be closed extensively for filming, or objects need to be taken off display for too long. However, in most museums only a small proportion of objects are on display at any one time, and many projects can use collections which would otherwise be in store.

**Public responsibility and ethics** Museums are public institutions and take the responsibilities that come with that seriously. Depending on their constitution, they may have to comply with charity law or the policies and procedures of central or local government. Their 'ethical' responsibilities mean that they have to place the public interest in museum collections ahead of all other interests. This does not mean that museums cannot engage in commercial ventures, but there may be some special considerations when they do so.

**Attitude to commercial activity** For the most part museums are not-for-profit organisations and the need for commercialism is an emerging one, whereas most of the creative industries are businesses that aim to generate income and profit. There is potential for tension and differing motivations here.

**Working practices and management** In many small museums, just one or two members of staff do everything: they care for collections, arrange displays, plan events, run the education and learning programme and manage marketing, the building and the museum shop. The advantage of this is that it is clear who to contact with ideas, and internal decision-making is relatively straightforward. In larger museums, different members of staff will be responsible for all these areas and your contact is likely to need to consult colleagues in other departments, so decision-making may be slower but the advantage is that larger museums have more capacity. Both small and large museums rely heavily on the work of volunteers, who can be extremely skilled and knowledgeable but often have no decision-making responsibility. Many local authority-run museums are relatively small and may have to refer some decisions to senior managers in the council. Independent museums are often very small and have limited budgets but typically have more freedom than government-run museums, although they may need to seek approval from their boards of trustees. All this

means that decision-making in museums can seem frustratingly slow to people used to the flexibility of small, private-sector organisations, so do bear that in mind.

Research for this project showed that there are some cultural barriers to be overcome if museums and the creative industries are to work together successfully. Other things to bear in mind are:

- Showing you have some basic awareness of the constraints that come from museums' public sector obligations and collections care responsibilities will help build museums' confidence in you
- Many museums are nervous about copyright and other intellectual property issues; be clear and upfront about your expectations here from the start and do what you can to help demystify this area. For more on intellectual property see Guidance Sheet 4
- Some parts of the museum community can seem quite risk averse: it may help to understand that this ultimately stems from their responsibilities to be good long-term stewards of their collections. If you can show that you have worked successfully for organisations that they see as similar (libraries, the heritage sector, education organisations), museums will feel more confident in working with you

Guidance Sheet 3 has more ideas about developing your business with museums, from building your client base to applying for funding for joint projects.

