

The Strategic Role of Resource Encouraging Partnerships

by KAREN KNIGHT

I have recently moved (8 weeks ago) from being a Director of a Museums and Archives Service in Reading, Berkshire, to join the staff of Resource – the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries. As Director at Reading I was appointed to the Board of Resource when it began life in April 2000. There were only four Board Members at that stage – there are now 16.

My move from board member to officer gives me an interesting perspective – let alone the new perspective of delivering a public service to being the equivalent of a Civil Servant!

WHAT IS RESOURCE?

A new strategic organisation for museums, libraries and archives, established by Government in April 2000. It is a non departmental public body „sponsored” by the Department for Culture Media and Sport.

Resource has three main objectives:

- First, providing strategic leadership and promoting change.

This is not however change for changes sake. It is about recognising change around us and in our public – and responding. Sometimes that amounts to saying more clearly what we are and why we deliver services in the way we do – or it means shifting that delivery to meet new demands and needs.

Either of these two for me, means change; a change of attitude. Gone are the days of a „divine right to be”. Even statutory services such as our public libraries have to fight for adequate revenue budgets, repair buildings or reinstate denuded book funds.

Museum curators and archivists too can no longer sit in ivory towers – we have to „earn” our place – make connections to the world around us.

- Our second objective is to act as an authoritative advocate and champion for the sector.

This relates back to the previous point about change. Advocates and champions are needed to keep saying why our services are important. We can no longer assume good will.

All the performance indicators in the world cannot describe the atmosphere in a well run, well used library, any more than the look on a child’s face when he or she holds a bronze age axe head in the palm of their hand.

Standards and indicators are all around us – but do not yet measure the intangible „worth” of libraries, museums or archives – their „civilising power” and contribution to the quality of life. But we are working on it! For this we need advocacy alongside indicators.

A single strategic body like Resource is a more powerful advocate than three separate voices from Museums, Archives and Libraries. There is a telling parallel here with the Arts Sector in this country. The Arts sector embraces art forms as diverse as ballet, modern dance, sculpture and pop music.

Yet it manages to set aside its differences and identify common ground for advocacy purposes. And is incredibly successful at this. There are lessons here for museums, archives and libraries.

- Our third objective is to advise on best practice and the delivery of specific objectives.

We will all have different „specific objectives” – those that emerge from the organisation itself – those that respond to new demands from our public and – the favourites here in England – those „laid upon us” by Government; life long learning, social inclusion, education, cultural diversity, disability access, health and safety, Best Value etc. etc.

All part of increased accountability and the terminology will I am afraid reoccur throughout this paper.

CORE VALUES

Resource has core values however, which underpin all aspects of our work:

- Developing the role of museums, libraries and archives into sustaining cultural, social, educational and economic well-being.
- Ensuring that museums libraries and archives recognise and promote physical and social inclusion - and cultural diversity.
- Focusing on the needs of actual or potential users' and, last but not least
- that partnerships and co-operation are essential components of success.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Some facts and figures about Resource:

- Circa 65 staff. (Who are just being brought together in one building)
- Total expenditure circa £20 million: of which Grant expenditure £18.5 million. We don't fund museums, libraries and archives direct. This is for Government/local authorities.

But we do fund regional strategic bodies which in turn administer small grants to non national museums; and we support developmental schemes such as:

- the Department for Culture Media and Sport's Wolfson Fund to do with hardware and training in libraries; or
- the Museums Designation Scheme putting money into making pre-eminent collections accessible, and schemes promoting partnership working (more of which later).

We have four main work programme themes:

- (i) Promotion, advocacy and planning
- (ii) Learning and access
- (iii) Standards and training
- (iv) Capacity building.

and an aggressive programme of research and statistics to underpin all these areas – back to that point about advocacy and needing the evidence of our impact in society.

WHY WAS RESOURCE CREATED?

To exploit cross-sectoral synergy on shared issues.

- Which includes funding; political advocacy; leadership and training; and being able to respond to external political, social and economic agendas.
- Cross sectoral synergy needs strategic leadership; identification of needs and priorities; and the establishment of a better planning framework.
- Exploiting that synergy means we need to build on shared values; eg. commitment to public service; respect for learning – and different ways of learning and, social inclusion.
- And cross sectoral synergy also needs to respect the differences between the sectors. This is an important point.

The great cry from all three domains when Resource was created was: „we’re not the same”! Resource and its creation does recognise that but there are shared issues and there is, as I have said, lobbying strength in being one sector.

Most importantly the public is a shared one – one which often cannot see the distinction between the institutions that all hold information.

Take the example of the local historian – when here in England photographs are held in the museum, the local studies library and the archive or record office.

We ought to be providing a seamless delivery or at very least a coherent network between the resources that we all hold.

What Resource is NOT about, is trying to make the infinite variety of our museums, libraries and archives fit into one standardised box.

It is about breaking down old and outdated divisions and freeing up the treasury of knowledge we hold - so that people can use it, see it, experience it.

WHAT HAS RESOURCE ACHIEVED?

- Impact on national political agendas.

It has done this through:

- more funding from 2002 – which we will use to build capacity in the regions – regional learning support units and regional funding units, (30% extra)
- through engaging with Government at the highest levels
- we have had impact through engaging with external agencies e.g. Lottery distributors/regional cultural consortia, etc.
- and by engaging with the professions – and highest on our agenda, through work on the future of training in the sector
- We are setting out an intellectual basis for cross-domain working through a number of strategies;
 - ICT strategy
 - Learning and access strategy
 - Research strategy
 - International strategy
 - Stewardship strategy

Strategies however are all very well – but they need implementing, either by applying direct additional funding or to „enable” in some other ways, through partnerships and advocacy.

- We have also achieved an impact on service delivery at regional and local level
 - Establishment of cross-domain agencies in the North East Region of England and in the East Midlands (to date – more to follow!)

- Direct impact by promoting cross-domain working through £600,000 challenge fund.
- (£25,000 to each region and £400,000 part of a competitive bidding process)
- Impact by extending existing schemes across other domains. The Sharing Museums Skills Millennium Scheme is one example where placements and exchanges were between museums when the scheme began.

This year it has been widened out to include archives and libraries. The next step is to get libraries on placement in museums and vice versa!

The British Library Cooperation and Partnership programme is another example. It was begun in 1999 to reinforce the British Library's commitment to cooperation in the library and information services world. Resource adds £50,000 to widen the scheme to benefit museums and archives.

Or the IT Modems scheme – a basic means of getting simple hardware in the smaller museums and archives. (Trying to catch up with libraries and the hardware provided by the People's Network).

EXAMPLES OF PARTNERSHIPS

I'd like to take three types of partnership:

- Within single domains
 - Within museums, libraries and archives as a single sector
 - Beyond museums, libraries and archives.
- (i) To take the first type; within the single domain - an obvious case study is that of the National Maritime Museum, which has undertaken an initiative in mapping and supporting in a variety of ways, maritime collections throughout the country.

The distribution of some collections held in Greenwich – more relevant to the interpretation of a particular locality – and an overview of duplicated items and overlap – can only help future collecting and deaccessioning policies let alone marketing or collaborative exhibition work. This is a real and valuable role for our „national” museums.

On a smaller scale my old museum in Reading runs consultancy days as part of a project funded by the Department for Education and Skills „New loans for the Millennium”.

80 years of experience and evaluation of sending museum objects out to school classrooms as teaching support material has built a wealth of knowledge and expertise.

The consultancy days are a way of sharing that knowledge with other museums. The dialogue of course, continues beyond the day and new networks and partnerships are born.

- (ii) Across libraries, museums and archives new partnerships are being developed – such as in the eastern region of England, where all three services are working together to provide a Web portal or „one stop shop” for the region’s collections and services – funded by Resource as part of our „cross domain agenda”.

In the South West there is a „cross domain social impact audit” being carried out which will measure the benefits of Libraries Museums and Archives across local communities.

Many of the projects recently awarded money under the New Opportunities Fund combine collections and material in really imaginative ways – archives working with a local studies library to create a „virtual” 17th century house for example.

And the British Library’s Co-operation and Partnership Programme which I mentioned earlier is a great example of both partnership and work reaching across the sector.

- (iii) Beyond our own sector there are partnerships to be built with the Arts Council for England, for example.

Their Creative Partnerships Scheme has been established to encourage school children to experience „cultural activity” from across the sector and beyond. A great opportunity to think laterally and build new bridges.

Resource, in its current work programme, is „setting out what needs to be done to improve the quality of leadership and training in the sector”.

This is bound to involve looking at other training providers – other sectors who have confronted „leadership” or the lack of it in their worlds.

Business and the Arts is an organisation here in England, which provides an obvious link - as do the education and training providers in higher education.

Links with the commercial worlds, I believe are essential to our sector; they can challenge, invigorate and inspire. They can also be alarming, overwhelming and dangerous!

But used wisely librarians, curators and archivists can gain much and have much to offer. The „not for profit sector“ has a great deal to offer in terms of different experiences, values and measures of success.

Libraries, of course are in some senses already part of this commercial world as providers of business libraries and ICT networks – streets ahead!

But for the rest of us, to make the point I return to Reading – (apologies) where we needed to raise money to support the loans of objects to schools.

Loans of objects to offices was the „idea“ (– not flat art but flat irons!) – and that idea needed a business plan. I found myself in the offices of Ernst & Young being asked - by two young men who had never visited a museum - what my „product sensitivity“ was and, what was my „market penetration“.

Markets, products and penetration were not terminology I had used in this context before! At first sight, they were entirely irrelevant to a Director of Museums and Archives.

I was forced to think differently and at the same time take on board – or disregard, the business techniques and analysis that were being shown me.

Reading now has a successful Business Partnership scheme which exchanges objects in purpose built display units for new audiences, new publics – and of course – the hire fee!

Partnerships have to be two way affairs and there is a danger when we are dealing with new worlds that we think we have little to offer - and return to the old concept of „sponsorship“ – when in reality we hold information, data, things; we can provide a sense of place, satisfy curiosity and give a context to the past to our confusing present. These are important and valuable offerings.

SOME FINAL POINTS TO MAKE

I come from a museums background and to me some of the synergies are obvious. Museums in this country are struggling with a number of issues where librarians can help us.

What, for example, is the scope for encouraging museums to loan some objects in the same way as libraries?

How can museums benefit from experience with ICT that librarians have gained?

How can librarians benefit from the kind of active interpretation role carried out by museum educators?

What can museums and archives learn from each other about the balance between access and preservation.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of joining the three „domains” (as we call them) together, is in terms of political profile and advocacy I mentioned earlier.

Of course there are differences between domains that need to be respected. But it is our contention that the areas of common interest outweigh the areas of specific professional interest. The bottom line is that the public expect seamless service delivery.

We have had to overcome some resistance - the silo mentality and we have had to develop intellectual underpinning to justify our case.

We ourselves can learn from experience in other countries, e.g.

- The ecole de patrimoine for archives in France
- The standards of collections management - Holland
- other structural arrangements - Scandinavia
- and integration with learning services – America’s expertise in Science Centres/children’s experience centres

I am sure you will all have your own examples of „good practise” and innovation.

Which is why today and the papers and discussions you will have formally and informally are so valuable in creating the ideas, connections and partnerships that are at the heart of the Resource agenda.