

# Exhibition Planning Toolkit

Written and produced by Museums Worcestershire

## Introduction

Objects are at the heart of all museums. They need to be presented in a way that does them justice. Displays need to be well researched, relevant to the audience, accessible and honest.

This toolkit sets out how to go about refreshing current displays and looks at various options for bringing in touring exhibitions or loans to augment in-house displays.

Getting the balance right can help your organisation access funding, link to local and national events, research collections and, crucially, encourage both new visitors and entice previous visitors back for more.

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## Guiding principles

### 1. Keep it relevant

Consider your audience and how they have responded to previous exhibitions. Consider target audiences / non-visitors and how new exhibitions can appeal to them.

### 2. Give your objects the attention they deserve

Find the hidden stories and celebrate them.

### 3. Make it accessible

Consider how people will move about the exhibition. Think about the size and style of text and the language used.

### 4. Challenge but don't alienate

Exhibitions can allow a certain amount of risk- don't be afraid to try something new.

### 5. Consider diverse perspectives

Re-tell familiar stories from different angles. Involve local groups.

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## Set your goals

Remember to set SMART goals within your exhibition planning.

**Specific:** Set dates for an exhibition well in advance to maximise development, loan and marketing opportunities.

**Measurable:** Perhaps a visitor count to aim for or wellbeing goals you want to achieve.

**Achievable:** Have all costs been taken into account?

**Realistic:** Do staff have the capacity to do the exhibition justice?

**Time:** Is there time to apply for funding and loans?

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## Conduct an audit

- Think about previous exhibitions - which themes attracted the most visitors?
- Consider the needs of your audience - read through comments books and feedback.
- Think about new target audiences and what appeals to them.
- Involve all staff and volunteers in the audit - you never know where discussions might lead and what passions you might uncover.
- Think about other museum teams and what their needs are.
- Think about significant, emotive or iconic objects in your collections or local stories that should be told.
- Ask yourself why this exhibition should take place in this museum.

# Re-thinking current displays

This doesn't need to be an expensive, time consuming process. It is an ideal opportunity for team work and engaging volunteers.

Undertake research into what your audiences enjoy the most or feel is lacking and work with your collection to find the stories that your objects have to tell.

Simply rejigging a case, juxtaposing objects and / or refreshing a label can be enough.

Consider preventative conservation - for example costume and watercolour paintings can be badly damaged by direct sunlight. Rotating displays can both conserve the object and provide another excuse for a visitor to return.

Think about new research, current affairs and changing public discourse and how that reflects on updating old interpretation.

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# Loans of individual objects

In some cases a display just needs one elusive object to make it all make sense. Loaning just one artwork, or a small group of objects from another organisation can have huge benefits, such as lower costs than a full touring exhibition and amazing joint marketing opportunities.

It is important, however, to bear in mind security implications and the wait times on loan decisions- often 9-12 months.

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# Touring exhibitions

If you have the space, bringing in an external exhibition is a wonderful way of attracting new visitors.

There are many organisations that offer fully formed, beautifully curated exhibitions that will suit a range of budgets- see links on page 4. There may be hidden costs on top of the hire fee so make sure you consider:

- Insurance (see also GIS info on page 4)
- Transport
- Set dressings
- Interpretation boards / vinyl
- Marketing
- Lenders fees
- Conservation
- Showcases / display stands
- Some lenders require merchandise to be sold

Sometimes exhibitions come with labels and panels, but its worth establishing a standard house style in terms of font style and size / colour scheme for all exhibition text and marketing.

## Handy hint

Measured floor plans (including location of power sockets, windows, radiators etc) and details of any spare showcases and plinths are always incredibly useful!

# Action plan

## Short term actions

- Decide on a theme.
- Begin your research.
- Research relevant funding opportunities (see below).
- Set your budget.
- Make formal loan requests.
- Start talking to marketing and education officers / teams if you have them.
- Consider the space available and any restrictions.

TOP TIP: Think about dimensions of access points / storage of delivery crates / completing facilities reports.

## Medium term actions

- Instruct insurers.
- Consider access within planning- physical and intellectual: spaces between showcases, height of interpretation and lighting.
- Write interpretation.
- Establish marketing / social media plan.
- Plan workshops / talks.
- Plan interactives.

TOP TIP: If using digital interactive or ones with small parts make sure you can sustain them throughout.

## Long term actions

- Set in place tools for evaluation – provide front of house teams with sheets to capture information.
- Maintain and develop relationships with partners to make future collaborations easier.
- If you have made your own exhibition could it be turned into a touring exhibition for income generation?

TOP TIP: Could you turn it into an online exhibition for when the physical exhibition ends?

# How to fund it

Art Fund Small Project Grants provide funding to help museums, galleries and other visual arts organisations realise adventurous projects, up to £10,000, across a range of activities to benefit their audiences.

The Weston Loan Programme provides funding and training for regional museums to secure important strategic loans from major UK collections - £5,000-25,000.

Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grants cover funding for travel and other practical costs, to help curators undertake collections and exhibition research projects in the UK or internationally - £200 to £2,000.

Arts Council England National Lottery Project Grants provides funding from £1,000 - £100,000.

For conservation of specific objects for display try the Leche Trust – up to £5,000.

If you have a fabulous collection of a particular thing, try joining a related Subject Specialist Network- e.g. the Costume Society, the Money and Medals Group, or the Society for Museum Archaeologists and see what they can offer.

# How to evaluate it

There are many ways to evaluate the success of an exhibition. The most obvious ones are visitor numbers and comments books, but the following methods can provide interesting pause for thought:

- Feedback from Front of House staff.
- A study of visitor behaviour during the exhibition: plot the way visitors move about the exhibition on a plan and note how long they spend in specific areas. This can be done by staff or volunteers.
- Visitor feedback through questionnaires or quizzes about how they felt or their wellbeing.

Some lenders will ask for their own evaluation forms to be completed. For example, the Arts Council asks for information such as: average attendance figures, target audience and demographic breakdown of visitors, number of exhibition catalogues/merchandise sold, attendance figures for talks/workshops and examples of marketing activities.

# Resources & Further Reading

## Funding

- Weston Loan <https://www.artfund.org/supporting-museums/programmes/weston-loan-programme>
- The Leche Trust <http://www.lechetrust.org/funding-guidelines.htm>
- Esme Fairbairn Collections Fund <https://www.museumsassociation.org/funding/esmee-fairbairn-collections-fund/>
- Art Fund Small Project Grants <https://www.artfund.org/supporting-museums/programmes/small-project-grants>
- Jonathon Ruffer Curatorial Grants  
<https://www.artfund.org/supportingmuseums/programmes/jonathan-ruffer-curatorial-grants>
- National Lottery Project Grants <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/projectgrants>

## Insurance

- Government Indemnity Scheme- allows art and cultural objects to be shown publicly in the UK which might not have been otherwise possible due to high cost of insurance:  
<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/protecting-cultural-objects/government-indemnity-scheme#section-1>

## Finding exhibitions / loans

- Touring Exhibition Group <https://touringexhibitionsgroup.org.uk/>
- Objects in private collections <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/tax-relief-for-national-heritage-assets>
- British Museum <https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/national/uk-touring-exhibitions-and-loans>
- TATE <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/collection>
- Ashmolean <https://www.ashmolean.org/exhibitions-hire>
- National Trust <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lists/loans-to-exhibitions>

## Display guidance

- <https://collectiontrust.org.uk/resource/conservation-and-lighting-guidance/>
- <https://collectiontrust.org.uk/resource/guidance-for-exhibiting-archive-and-library-materials/>

## Environmental monitoring

- <https://collectiontrust.org.uk/resource/environmental-monitoring-in-museums/>

## Advice on effective museum interpretation:

- <https://www.museumdevelopmentyorkshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Practical-guide-for-text-interpretation-2017.pdf>

## Advice on exhibition interactives

- <https://interactions.history.sa.gov.au/2015/12/tips-for-creating-engaging-museum-interactives>



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