

# A Sixth Sense

Supporting museums  
in the West Midlands



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# A Sixth Sense: Executive Summary

## This is the third joint annual report of the network of West Midlands Museum Development Officers (WMMDOs).

The WMMDOs provide advice and support to a wide range of museums across the West Midlands, helping them to develop and sustain the high standards that are essential for survival in an uncertain economic environment.

During 2011/12 the WMMDOs have focused on organisational sustainability and resilience, encouraging museums to adapt to change by adopting new ways of working, developing new partnerships, engaging more with their communities and making more effective use of volunteers. Environmental concerns have been high on their agenda, supporting museums to adopt a 'greener' approach as they plan for a long-term sustainable approach to the care of collections. They have also facilitated a wide range of learning and training opportunities, and, in particular, have encouraged museums to take up the challenge of digital engagement.

### Achievements in 201/12 include:

- ▶ Support for **197 non-hub museums**
- ▶ **117 museums supported in attaining or maintaining Accreditation**
- ▶ **70 networking events or training courses organised**
- ▶ **1,026 instances of general support and coaching**
- ▶ **£41,517 distributed to museums in support of improvements**
- ▶ **11,008 hours of direct support by WMMDOs to museums**
- ▶ **Project Jumpstart volunteer development initiative**

Feedback from the museums themselves has been consistently positive. The museums see the WMMDOs as a link with the wider sector and a source of advice and information about policy initiatives, collections care, educational developments, funding opportunities and networking. Many of the museums are very small, and they see the advice of the WMMDOs as crucial in helping them to make the most effective use of their resources to improve the quality of experience they offer to their visitors and communities.

As one museum explained,  
"We see our MDO as our first point of contact when we need advice and have every confidence in her abilities to provide support – a real lifeline!"

Another put it succinctly,  
"Our MDO seems to have a sixth sense for knowing where help is needed".

# Introduction

£41,517 distributed to museums in the West Midlands to support improvements.

**The West Midlands Museum Development Officer (WMMDO) network was set up in 2003 to facilitate closer collaborative working between the individual Museum Development Officers in each county. The network also enables the WMMDOs to provide strategic guidance and support to a wide range of museums and heritage organisations in the region, large and small.**

The WMMDO network encourages museum organisations to work in partnership, engage more closely with their local communities, and develop the new skills that are needed to meet the challenges of a changing world. The WMMDOs also provide museums and heritage sites in the region with up-to-date intelligence about funding opportunities and information about wider initiatives that may be of benefit. Perhaps most importantly, the network promotes the sharing of best practice across county boundaries.

The WMMDOs also provide support for specific project development and funding applications, as well as offering small grants to help museums achieve recognised standards in collections care and visitor services.

The network is managed by the Marches Network, which is made up of senior museum officers in the five counties and West Midlands conurbation. This group grew out of a mutual recognition of the benefits of working in partnership to achieve shared goals and to champion the heritage of the region.

Since 2004, the WMMDO network has received Renaissance in the Regions funding in support of a strategic aim to spread the benefits of this programme more equitably across the region. With the demise

of the MLA and the transfer of responsibility for the museum sector to the Arts Council of England (ACE), the original Renaissance scheme is being wound down. A new delivery model for museum development is being introduced, with contracts being awarded in May 2012.

Although 2011/12 has been a year of transition, the WMMDOs have extended the range of their activities, with a greater focus on shared themes and delivering outcomes across the whole region. The strong relationships that they have developed with museums and heritage organisations in the region give them a deep understanding of the needs and aspirations of the sector. They are exceptionally well placed to adapt to the new model of delivery and meet ACE's priorities for museums.

WMMDO support has helped museums to broaden access, recruit new volunteers, develop new and imaginative educational provision, and to become more sustainable. There is a very high level of satisfaction with their work among museums, many of which have seen tangible improvements that they could not have achieved without WMMDO guidance and support. There is clear evidence that the museum development programme is having a very real impact across the region.

A young costumed Interpreter at Berrington Hall, near Leominster.



# Promoting excellence in museums

The West Midlands is a region of great variety, encompassing heavily built up areas and wide rural stretches. Museum provision reflects this variety and includes local authority, independent, regimental, university and company museums, as well as National Trust properties, historic houses, former chapels, industrial archaeology sites, historic railways and other heritage attractions.

The WMMDOs play a vital role in helping these museums achieve excellence in their own particular way. They are also acutely aware that this is not easy to achieve. Many of the museums they work with are small and have very limited resources. Many of the smaller independent museums are volunteer-led, and have no paid staff. Some volunteer groups are currently in the early stages of museum development and the WMMDOs are a vital source of coaching and advice for these 'proto-museums'.

WMMDO advice, guidance and financial support is often crucial in helping these museums to prioritise and make the most effective use of their resources, while continuing to focus on the collections that are at the heart of their mission. Often a relatively small investment from the Museum Development Officer (MDO) will enable a museum both to improve standards of collection care and to update its displays in a way that improves the quality of visitor experience and encourages greater public engagement. Similarly, advice about volunteer management can help a small museum to become more efficient and professional in its approach to delivering services to visitors.

"Very valuable advice and support as ever, much needed in view of our geographical isolation, small size, and entirely volunteer-run operation".

- ▶ During 2011/12 WMMDOs provided more than 11,008 hours of direct support to non-hub museums – an increase of 20% over the previous year
- ▶ WMMDOs supported 117 museums in maintaining or achieving Accreditation
- ▶ WMMDOs provided bespoke advice to museums and heritage organisations across the region on 591 occasions
- ▶ WMMDOs took part in 228 on-site informal learning activities
- ▶ WMMDOs gave significant capacity building support to 41 museums
- ▶ WMMDOs support at least 1814 unpaid or volunteer workers in museums and heritage organisations (315 of whom were recruited during the past year)
- ▶ WMMDOs support around 1000 paid workers in museums and heritage organisations (but this figure is decreasing and museums reported the loss of at least 27 FTE posts)

Source: Annual WMMDO satisfaction survey 2011/12

"The flexible and approachable service provided is welcome especially for an all-volunteer museum, which would perhaps otherwise find professional museum assistance and support difficult to obtain. The regular visits from the MDO provide a most welcome update and allow us to discuss and learn about how services to visitors can be improved and maintained".



The West Midlands Museum Development Officers at Winterbourne House and Garden, Spring 2012.

Despite the continuing impact of the government's austerity programme on local authority museums and funding streams, there is evidence of increasing public participation with heritage sites and museums across the UK. A recent survey by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport showed that 72% of adults visit a heritage site each year, with 47% of people visiting a museum or gallery at least once a year. Local patterns of visiting are inconsistent. While many museums reported little change, around a quarter of those surveyed in Herefordshire and Shropshire reported a decrease in visitor numbers, while 36% of those in Shropshire and 61% of Staffordshire museums reported an increase (source: Annual WMMDO satisfaction survey 2011/12). It is clear that museums are seen to have real value in both cultural and economic terms, and that museum development activity contributes greatly to that perception.

"Very valuable advice and support as ever, much needed in view of our geographical isolation, small size, and entirely volunteer-run operation".

WMMDOs provide advice and support in many different ways including site visits, one-to-one coaching sessions, advice given over the phone, newsletters, e-alerts via social media and direct mailings. They also organise Network events and training sessions, offer strategic advice and broker partnerships. Through all these activities the WMMDOs help museums and heritage sites across the region achieve excellence.

"The Conurbation Museums Officer has a wealth of knowledge about how best to access information and funding. She gives not only practical support, but a great deal of sensible and re-assuring advice. She has an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the museums world and has never failed to point me in the right direction for an answer, or tell me someone who can help. We value her opinion and expertise enormously. Everything we do would take far longer and use up more of our time if it were not for the helpful role of the CMO".

# Cross-regional working, networks and partnerships

**Cross-regional working, partnerships and networking are crucial to the work of the WMMDOs. They meet monthly in order to monitor progress on projects and discuss new initiatives and also attend the Marches Network meetings. They made a significant contribution to the original Renaissance in the Regions programme in the West Midlands, with input into a variety of strategic groups, working groups and project delivery.**

The WMMDOs are integral to a wide range of National, Regional and sub-regional strategic partnerships that help to draw different programmes and projects together within a wider framework. They have continued to play an active part in the development of the national network of MDOs, ensuring that the West Midlands maintains an influential voice within this increasingly important organisation. One of the WMMDOs is a member of the National Council of the Association of Independent Museums, one of the largest and most active membership groups in the sector.

At the same time, they are actively involved in wider regional cultural networks, and with their respective local strategic partnership groupings, in order to ensure the presence of a museums' perspective within broader strategies. The Conurbation MDO, for example, is the co-ordinator of both the Black Country Creative Education Network and the Birmingham Creative Education Network.

Cross regional events and programmes organised and delivered by the WMMDOs during 2011/12 included the *Boo! Making a noise about Family Friendly* seminar, the *Greener Museums* programme, the *Project Jumpstart* volunteer development initiative, further Mystery Shopper activities, promoting the use of the AIM Economic Impact Toolkit, and programme support grant schemes.

The WMMDOs have also instigated, helped to broker or have been significantly involved in a variety of project-based partnerships both regionally and in their own areas. The link with the wider cultural sector that WMMDOs provide is greatly appreciated by local museums and heritage sites, in particular, the way this opens up opportunities for further collaboration and development.



Judith Karena, MDO Shropshire, talks at the Shropshire Museum Forum.

## Just some of the networks WMMDOs are involved with:

### NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS:

National Museum Development Network  
 Association of Independent Museums Council  
 Creative Apprenticeships implementation group  
 Marches Network  
 Arts Council England  
 Group for Education in Museums  
 West Midlands Museums Policy Forum  
 West Midlands Regional Culture and Sport Network  
 The Midlands Federation of Museums  
 Fast Forward Editorial Board  
 Renaissance WM Workforce Development Task and Finish Group  
 Renaissance West Midlands Audience Development Steering Group  
 West Midlands Hub Education Working Group  
 Museum on the Move  
 The Collections Care Working Group  
 Emergency Response Network  
 Children's University  
 National Trust

### SUB-REGIONAL AND LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS INCLUDE:

Countywide museum and heritage networks and fora (for example, Museums and Heritage Group Worcestershire)  
 Audiences Shropshire network  
 Birmingham Creative Education Network  
 Birmingham Heritage Forum  
 Black Country Collections Online  
 Black Country Creative Education Network  
 Black Country Heads of Service  
 Distinctly Black Country landscape network  
 Herefordshire Archive Forum  
 Herefordshire Cultural Consortium  
 Herefordshire Life partnership  
 Herefordshire volunteering partnership  
 Shropshire Volunteer Community Council  
 Staffordshire Museums Network  
 Staffordshire Museums Strategic Consortium  
 Staffordshire Hoard – Mercian Trail Partnership  
 Warwickshire social media development group  
 South Warwickshire Voluntary Action Heritage Volunteers partnership  
 LearningWorcs (cross-domain learning network)  
 Warwickshire and Coventry Cultural Consortium  
 Oswestry Heritage Forum (local)  
 West Midlands Emergency Response Network Management Committee  
 Wrekin Local Studies Forum  
 Wrekin Museum Partnership

Shropshire Museum Forum members take the opportunity to enjoy some informal networking at their meeting in April 2012.



## Case Study: Audiences Shropshire Network

The MDO for Shropshire has helped to develop the Audiences Shropshire Network, which brings arts, culture and heritage organisations together to network, collaborate and engage in audience development. It is a partnership between Audiences Central and Shropshire Council Arts & Festival Team.

### Among the issues that the network has explored are:

- ▶ Volunteer sharing - opportunities for arts, culture and heritage organisations to create a mechanism for pooling volunteers
- ▶ Engaging young audiences - sharing good practice in youth engagement, contacts and joint working
- ▶ Database & Audience Sharing - looking at how to share audiences and audience data, through collaboration, sharing links and joint projects

- ▶ Shropshire wide Open Studios - a network of visual arts organisations coordinating county wide events
- ▶ Arts & Heritage sectors working together; how arts and heritage organisations can work together on joint projects, to share examples of good practice and to identify opportunities for collaboration
- ▶ Using Google calendar as a tool to improve planning and collaboration and avoid clashing events

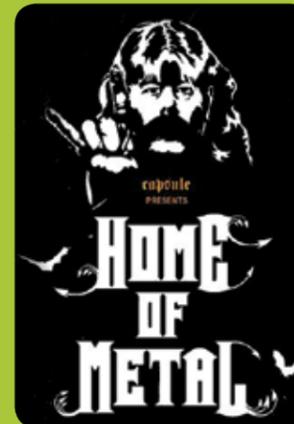
The Audience Shropshire Project is progressing with links between artists and museums developing and training and CPD opportunities emerging.

In addition to formal partnerships, WMMDOs have been instrumental in facilitating a variety of informal networking activities designed to encourage an exchange of information and best practice and collaborative working.

WMMDOs also serve on, or advise, a variety of museum trust boards within their own areas. They have also developed close links with other local service providers,

such as Libraries and Archives, Schools Improvement, tourism and social services. With the support of the Conurbation Museums Officer, the Black Country Creative Education Network, for example, organised a series of "Getting to know you" events, exploring the potential of delivering museum services to social care providers.

## Case Study: Home of Metal Festival, Black Country



The **Home of Metal** festival celebrated Birmingham and the Black Country as the birthplace of heavy metal music. The festival culminated in a weekend events programme during September 2011. Exhibitions and workshops also took place from June to October. In the Black Country, 14 museums and cultural venues from Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton participated in the festival. The University of Wolverhampton hosted an international conference on heavy metal music.

Over 200,000 individuals experienced the **Home of Metal** festival in the Black Country, either as visitors, volunteers, participants or volunteers. The festival generated approximately £180,000 of economic impact in the Black Country. 46,956 visitors came to the area specifically to visit attend the festival. For 11,000 people it was the first time they had participated in a cultural event. 40% of respondents to an evaluation questionnaire indicated that the festival had improved their perception of the cultural offer in the Black Country.

The Conurbation Museums Officer (CMO) worked with Capsule (a specialist music promotions company) to broker partnerships and support delivery of the festival across the Black Country. The CMO played a crucial role in organising partner meetings, identifying and engaging partners, working with Capsule project managers and acting as a central contact point for the Black Country partners. The CMO also worked closely with the consultant who undertook the festival evaluation. This focussed on developing visitor questionnaires and venue evaluation forms.

The **Home of Metal** festival was the first time that museums and cultural venues across the Black Country had worked in partnership to deliver a single themed event. Heads of Service in the region are currently exploring options to continue to develop joint programming and deliver future festivals, including a Black Country marketing and communications network.

## Case Study : Getting To Know You Programme

The Black Country Education Network is a long-established group with representatives from museums, libraries and archives across the sub-region.

In response to the introduction of the personalisation agenda and social care reforms network members decided to explore how their services and venues could be made available to social care users.

Using Renaissance funding from Wolverhampton Arts & Heritage Service, the project centred around a series of "Getting to Know You" events. These events were hosted in museums, libraries and archives. Local care providers and users were invited

to attend. The focus was to ask users what services they would like the museums and other services to offer, and how the network could respond to their needs.

The Conurbation Museum Officer organised project meetings, and co-ordinated the production of promotional and evaluation materials. As a direct result of the project, one venue, Walsall Leather Museum, has established a conservation club. The club provides an informal atmosphere for people to discuss their memories. Sandwell Museum Service is hoping to develop closer working relationship with social care providers in their borough.

## Case study: A Year in the Orchard partnership



In 2011 Herefordshire celebrated **A Year in the Orchard**. Museums, archives, cider and perry producers, Herefordshire Nature Trust, the Orchard Topic Group, Hereford Cathedral, tourism groups and others joined together to create a county-wide programme of themed events. These were branded with a distinctive Year in the Orchard logo, which gained significant recognition, publicity

and coverage. The brand was also used to badge participating sites who were taking part in Heritage Open Days. The partnership was also featured in two Herefordshire Life articles, which highlighted events in May – blossom time – and October – harvest time.



Employees of Melias Food Distributors, Leominster, late 19th century. One of the images from the Winterbourn Archive (Courtesy of Hereford Museum & Art Gallery)

## Case study: Promoting Early European Photographers

Employees of Melias Food Distributors, Leominster, late 19th century. One of the images from the Winterbourn Archive (Courtesy of Hereford Museum & Art Gallery).

The trans-national partnership project Promoting Early European Photographers (PEEP) involved Herefordshire's MDO working with The Share Initiative (TSI) and museums from Iceland, Slovakia and Swansea.

Supported through the European Commission's Grundtvig programme, the project is using an archive of photographs by the Leominster photographer Thomas Henry Winterbourn, which has been acquired by the MDO for the Museum Resource and Learning Centre's collection. The MDO has worked closely with the Slovakian partners in the design and wording of their academic posters.

The archive is also being used as the basis of the VIEW+ project, which is providing volunteers with training in collections care and exhibition development. A year long, changing exhibition is being staged at Leominster Museum, using photographic material that is usually housed at the Museum Resource and Learning Centre.

# Investing in a skilled workforce

The WMMDOs recognise the vital importance of a well-informed, well-trained and highly motivated workforce for the health of the sector. As well as providing regular information updates and opportunities for knowledge sharing at network or forum meetings in their own areas, the WMMDOs organise and facilitate a variety of training and learning opportunities.

In 2011/12 WMMDOs convened 70 seminars, training sessions and leaning events around the region. These covered issues and topics such as:

- ▶ *Boo! Making a Noise About Family Friendly conference*
- ▶ *Brighter Green: Environment-Friendly Collections Care for Museums*
- ▶ Accessible Museums
- ▶ Sustainable Collections
- ▶ Marketing to schools
- ▶ Accreditation
- ▶ Oral History training
- ▶ Wikipedia editor training and back-stage pass event
- ▶ Digital media
- ▶ Gift Aid
- ▶ Development of AIM toolkit worksheets
- ▶ Collection handling
- ▶ Mounting and labelling objects
- ▶ Preventative conservation
- ▶ Book and paper cleaning
- ▶ Emergency and forward planning training



Children's University at the Boo Event, Thinktank.

In all, 345 museums and heritage organisations were supported with training. The WMMDOs also supported a wide range of informal on-site learning activities, providing coaching for individual organisations, many of which are small and under-resourced and would otherwise find it difficult to access training opportunities. In Shropshire, for example, the MDO and members of the Shropshire Council Museums Team offered intensive coaching support to the newly formed Oswestry Museum group. In Herefordshire the MDO helped deliver a training day for Ledbury Heritage Centre Volunteers.

Many of these activities have involved volunteers and the WMMDOs are particularly concerned to help the museums and heritage sites that they work with to make more effective use of volunteers. Several of the MDOs also act as mentors to small museums, as well as serving on trust boards or attending board meetings as advisors.

The WMMDOs have also contributed to conferences and seminars organised by other organisations, such as the Midlands Federation of Museums & Galleries, the Museums Association and AIM.

They have also been involved in the advocacy and presentation of the museum sector, policies and current issues to organisations outside the sector. For example, the Worcestershire MDO gave a presentation on museum organisations to students at Worcester University.

"The MDO arranges training programmes that contribute to our staff skill base and help our organisation to deliver best practice".

## Case study: Staffordshire Museum Network Events

**Keeping Collections Alive:** Museum of Cannock Chase (September 2011) focused on issues around collections, particularly storage and capacity. According to the latest Fast Forward Survey over 50% of the Region's museums stores are full. Of the remaining 50% – 66% will be full in 5 years. Yet it is the museums with the least capacity that are still actively collecting. In Staffordshire areas of concern include agricultural collections and costume/textile collections. Museums in the county are continuing to collect but this is often around specific targeted areas – project based collecting, gap filling, specific subject related areas (i.e. Regimental archives) or photographic material. Issues discussed included offsite and shared storage, overlapping collecting policies and disposal.

**The ABC of Marketing to Schools:** RAF Museum, Cosford (December 2011): This session explored some of the issues around marketing to schools, such as how to attract visits from new schools, how to develop realistic packages on a limited budget, and how to make the museum appealing to different ages/ stages of the National Curriculum. It was suggested that schools are looking for

sustained partnerships with museums that can offer pupils ownership of space, engaging and interactive experiences and a real-life context. Possible routes into a new school might include offering to deliver an assembly or school club, or running a competition. The session also explored ways in which museum themes can be used to explore less obvious subjects and the importance of teacher consultation in developing and evaluating this provision. As resources continue to decrease, it was suggested that museums should consider becoming 'community links', rather than delivering all sessions themselves. The role of volunteers in providing subject specialist learning sessions and the value of linking with other bodies such as Education Business Partnerships (EBP), STEM and the Children's University were also raised.

**Survival of the Fittest:** Staffordshire Place, Stafford (March 2012): 7 Staffordshire Museums took part in this session which focused on some of the issues around economic sustainability and in particular the use of the AIM Economic Toolkit for making successful funding applications.



## Case Study: Wikipedia Backstage Pass Event at Black Country Living Museum

In February 2012 The Black Country Living Museum held a Wikipedia Backstage Pass event. Seven Wikipedia editors were given a "backstage pass" to visit the collection stores at the museum, an area that is not normally open to the public. Editors also explored the museum's archive, which offers a wealth of information for Wikipedia articles.

Other regional museums and societies also brought along their own collections and information for the Wikipedia editors to explore. These were The Black Country Society, Pen Room, Assay Office and Smethwick Heritage Centre.

The day resulted in new Wikipedia articles focusing on the museum and its collections. The Black Country Living Museum formed useful contacts, and some Wikipedia editors have asked to come back to explore the collections further.

"An excellent day with a good group that went some way to demonstrate what the Black Country Living Museum is all about, from a slightly different perspective than normal".

The event was supported by the Arts Council Museum Development Fund, Wikipedia consultant Andy Mabbett and the Conurbation Museums Officer.

The WMMDOs have also continued to improve their own skills and knowledge base. Professional Development activities in 2011/12 have included attendance at a range of conferences, seminars and briefing sessions, as well as training courses and workshops. These have included:

- ▶ National MDO conference (organiser)
- ▶ AIM conference
- ▶ Museums Association conference
- ▶ Midlands Federation of Museums & Galleries AGM
- ▶ Arts & Social Care conference
- ▶ Big Society conference
- ▶ Aspiring Leaders programme
- ▶ Collections Trust conference
- ▶ *New Directions* seminar
- ▶ *Engaging with business*
- ▶ *What Social Media can do for you*
- ▶ *Arts Audiences: Insight & segmentation*
- ▶ *Collections in a time of Crisis*
- ▶ Emergency Response Network Insurance Seminar
- ▶ ICT training
- ▶ Museum mentor refresher sessions
- ▶ SMELT network (supporting the use of science collections in education)
- ▶ Wiki & QR codes
- ▶ Knowledge transfer days sessions
- ▶ Sector-specific briefings
- ▶ RAPT (Risk Awareness Profiling Tool) Training
- ▶ Rural Museums Network Event

"We have all gained from our networking, the training, speakers advice and guidance all initiated by our MDO; and at the same time we benefit from mutual support, speak with one voice and have made long and lasting friendships".

# A volunteer development initiative: *Project Jumpstart*

***Project Jumpstart* was an inspirational project designed to help museums and heritage organisations in the West Midlands to increase and sustain volunteer opportunities. The project aimed to raise confidence among staff and volunteers through consultation and community mapping, encouraging heritage sites to think differently about volunteering.**

A small number of sites took part. Each had its unique starting point and past experiences, from which a targeted action plan was developed to suit its particular needs. This involved consultation with staff and volunteers at each site to identify the skills gap and agree ways of addressing this. This process of engagement and consultation proved extremely successful in supporting the development of volunteer management.

At the Welsh Guards Museum volunteer roles and responsibilities were agreed and a volunteer management system introduced. Workshop sessions looked at ways of widening the appeal of volunteering to recruit from a broader constituency. A youth placement programme was suggested as one way of attracting younger volunteers. Support was also given to the development of a volunteer management structure for the new Oswestry Museum.

Tutbury Museum's volunteer group not only agreed a new volunteer management system, but worked collectively to develop a new museums leaflet which includes a QR code, and ran a recruitment campaign which brought in 14 new volunteers. They have also increased the profile and visibility of the museum, which is now featured on Enjoy Staffordshire website.

Leominster Museum distributed flyers and posters targeting the local community, which raised the profile of the museum and boosted volunteer recruitment.

Volunteers have been crucial for the development of the Museum of Carpet in Kidderminster, which opens in the autumn of 2012. Having volunteer recruitment and management procedures in place provides an operational resource that has actively improved the museum's ability to plan logistically.

Project Jumpstart was essentially an action research project, identifying skills gaps, looking at marketing and communication, community mapping, sustainability and monitoring. By helping museums to increase the visibility of their volunteering opportunities, the project has made it easier for people to get involved. In turn, this helps museums to become more sustainable, resilient and innovative. With a larger and more diverse, volunteer base, museums are better able to shape and enrich our cultural experience, using the talents and knowledge of local people to help bring our histories and stories alive.

New volunteers at the Judge's Lodging, Herefordshire.



# Investing in improvement

One of the ways in which the WMMDOs help museums and heritage sites to improve both collections care and their visitor offer is through grant aid. Many of the museums they work with are small, have limited resources and few or no paid staff. A small grant can have an impact that is out of proportion to its monetary value by allowing a museum to address its own particular needs and priorities in its own way. However, all grants are designed to help museums improve their practice and facilities in line with the standards set out in *Fast Forward*, the West Midlands regional benchmarking project, and the Arts Council's overall goals for museums.

In 2011/12 a total of £41,517 was distributed in the form of 77 grants to non-hub museums and heritage organisations in the region to help them improve their services and facilities. These included local authority, independent, university, and company museums. Although this represents a 32% decrease compared with the previous year, when grants amounting to £61,537 were distributed to 98 organisations across the region, 2011/12 was a year of transition which saw the winding up of the MLA, which had until then distributed museum development funding through the original Renaissance in the Regions programme.

Although the total value of awards is relatively small, and the average individual grant is modest, the feedback from museums indicates that grant aid has a real impact in terms of improvement. Many museums report that a small investment enables them to make significant qualitative changes to the overall visitor experience.

"Programme development grants are essential to small organisations with limited resources. We have found the structure of the programme support grant process to be efficient, successful and highly valued by everyone involved".

#### Projects and activities that received grant funding in 2011/12 include:

- ▶ the creation of a Local History Centre display area
- ▶ purchase of environmental monitoring equipment
- ▶ a volunteer recruitment day
- ▶ a feasibility study to look at the potential of using hydro-electric power at a museum site
- ▶ installation of energy efficient lighting
- ▶ improving the visitor experience through re-labelling and redisplay
- ▶ installation of an alarm system
- ▶ meeting and maintaining the Accreditation standard
- ▶ support for staff and volunteer training

"We believe we are ready and capable of being a good accredited museum, and a popular visitor attraction. We are grateful to have received small financial awards which have enabled us to purchase items which we could not otherwise afford. We need the continuing support and advice of the MDO in order to improve as a successful museum".

"Without the help of the MDO it would be very difficult for small museum like us to have the resources to run the Centre".

Distribution of WMMDO grants 2011/12	Number of grants	Value of grants £	% split (value)	% split (distrib)
Local Authority	21	£15,407	37%	27%
Independent	51	£22,670	55%	66%
National Trust	1	0*	%	1%
Regimental	1	0*	%	1%
University	1	£1,000	2%	1%
English Heritage	0	0	0	0
National	0	0	0	0
Company	2	£2,440	6%	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>£41,517</b>		

Note: \*Although a National Trust site and a regimental museum each received a grant, full details were not available and the grants are aggregated within the independent museum total.

# Sustainable and resilient museums

The WMMDOs have been particularly concerned to encourage museums and heritage sites to look at ways in which they can become more sustainable and resilient in an uncertain economic climate. This involves both the better use of existing resources and looking at new ways of working.

Many of the museums they work with are small, with no paid staff, and very limited resources. WMMDO advice is often crucial in helping these museums to prioritise and make the most effective use of their resources, while continuing to focus on the collections that are at the heart of their mission.

In planning for a long-term sustainable approach to the care of collections, many of the museums have similar concerns. The WMMDOs have continued to encourage better stewardship by helping museums to improve their environmental monitoring and promoting a 'greener' approach.

The launch of the 'Greener Museums' programme in 2011 gave museums the opportunity to assessing their sustainability and environmental impact through the use of the Green Museums Toolkit (developed by Renaissance East Midlands). Museums were able to measure themselves against the toolkit and develop an action plan to initiate changes and site improvements with the aim of becoming more economically and environmentally sustainable. Funding was awarded to support sustainable developments on each site.

The Spring Greens event in April 2012 highlighted some of the learning gained from this programme, as well as case studies from other sites across the region that demonstrate the benefits of green energy and sustainable building options for museums. At Chedham's Yard, a site with limited access to utilities, volunteers had introduced a composting toilet, solar panels and a wood burning stove. The grounds incorporate a vegetable patch and fruit trees which create a bee corridor and the site has submitted an application to the Green Tourism Business Award Scheme.



MDOs help museums to develop their schools offer.

Volunteers at Chedham's Yard, Warwickshire, helping to create a sustainable environment.



## Case study: Support for Environmental Monitoring

Four new museums took part in Staffordshire's programme of supporting museums to develop staff skills and practical facilities to monitor the environmental conditions of collections in store. The Ancient High House, the Betty Smithers Design Collection, the Dudson Museum and the Weston Park Foundation were loaned data-loggers to capture environmental readings in their stores and displays for a period of 6 months.

Staff and volunteers were mentored and supported in the use of the equipment and analysis of the data produced. Both the Betty Smithers Design Collection and the Dudson Museum are using this data to improve environmental conditions in their buildings.

At Weston Park, environmental monitoring is being extended throughout the building and staff and volunteers trained to enhance their awareness of environmental controls. Each site was awarded a £500 grant to purchase equipment.

"An excellent practical activity which has served to re-focus the team on environmental issues and enable us to monitor previously non-monitored spaces".

Several museums have received support from Staffordshire's Flying Collections Assistant, who has not only providing training in using monitoring equipment but has encouraged staff to adopt practical, money-saving measures to help improve their environmental sustainability. At Claymills Victorian Pumping Station, for example, there is now a post of Environmental Director and volunteers are encouraged to monitor bills and energy consumption.

New LED lighting was installed in Clun museum in 2011 with the support of WMMDf funding.



Environmental monitoring at Cheddleton Flint Mill.



## Case Study: Staffordshire's Greener Museums Pilot Scheme

£8,000 was invested in a pilot programme in Staffordshire involving five museums.

Cheddleton Flint Mill is a water mill that once processed flint for the pottery industry. The canal-side site features two water mills, a period cottage and a small museum. It is an Accredited museum. Volunteers made small changes to improve environmental conditions within the listed buildings, including loft insulation, removable secondary glazing and the use of bio-degradable grease for the engines. Other work on the site concentrated on the outside spaces, ecology and bio-diversity with the creation of an allotment and wild flower meadow. Funding was also provided to undertake a feasibility study to look at the potential of hydro-electric power on the site.

In Newcastle-under-Lyme, the Green Toolkit was used to establish a base line for electricity and gas consumption at the Borough Museum. Work was undertaken to install a new LED lighting scheme in the galleries to try to reduce electricity consumption. Secondary glazing and blinds were also installed, along with new UVPC windows on the office suite. As a result there has been a substantial reduction in costs and the museum has become a green champion for the Local Authority.

New gallery lighting, designed both to improve the visitor experience and the care of fragile display items, was also installed at the Staffordshire County Museum.

Improvements at the Samuel Johnson Birthplace Museum in Lichfield included replacement and development of parts of central heating system, while at Tamworth Castle environmental conditions were improved at the museum's off-site collections store.

"Being involved in the Greener Museums project has been very important to us, giving us access to advice and expertise and also funding for something which has made a great difference to our sustainability but also the conditions for our building and collection".

## Case Study: Tudor House, Worcester



Volunteers from Tudor House in Worcester were able to use 'sustainable volunteers' funding from the MDO to make a visit to Shakespeare's Birthplace and Mary Arden's House in Stratford-upon Avon. Here they were able to see a successful volunteer work force in action and identify aspects of best practice which have now been adopted within their own site.

They felt that the use of costumes by both volunteer guides and visiting school children was particularly effective, and saw how volunteer knowledge and enthusiasm can make the visitor experience much more interesting. One of the volunteers commented that the visit 'made me realise my own worth a lot in connection with Tudor House' and the museum has now expanded its own costumed interpretation.

Tudor House also used MDO funding to host a volunteer recruitment day. This allowed them to develop role profiles and market the event around the county. The event was promoted as widely

as possible, using posters, local radio and other media. During the day there were 27 enquiries from interested people, 18 new volunteers (including 9 students) were recruited, with a further 3 hoping to start later in spring.

This increase in involvement has allowed Tudor House to develop new teams to undertake marketing activities and to improve the web site, where they are looking at redesign and methods of refreshing it more frequently. The recently retired county archivist has also been recruited as a volunteer.

Tudor House was also able to buy new and professional looking badges in order to create a better 'brand', increase the feeling of inclusiveness among volunteers, and help boost better volunteer retention. A subsequent volunteer and visitor survey showed overwhelming approval of the badges, with 100% of respondents agreeing that they made the volunteers look more professional.



Volunteers Geoffrey and Mary at Leominster Museum, with a display of photographs from the Winterbourn collection.

The WMMDOs have also been encouraging museums to consider ways in which they might work in partnership and pool resources both to achieve economies of scale and a greater public impact, for example, through shared digital platforms, joint marketing and promotion, and collaborative programming.

They have supported museums in adapting to change by reviewing their business models, identifying new income streams and looking at new ways of encouraging giving.

The WMMDOs continually challenge the museums and heritage sites that they work with to develop more innovative and approaches to engaging with communities and, in particular, to make more effective use of volunteers. They have been encouraging museums to recruit volunteers from a wider pool in the hope that, in becoming more representative of their communities, they will also become more sustainable.

## Measuring impact

The WMMDOs have continued to use a common evaluation and satisfaction survey to capture the opinions of museums and heritage sites about the services they offer. The satisfaction survey was first used in 2009/10 and is designed to measure the impact of their work against Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) and Generic Social Outcomes (GSOs).

Museums across the region were asked to respond to a set of range statements in order to identify the impact of the MDO's activities on their organisations. The range statements were designed to show how the WMMDOs have helped to:

- ▶ improve levels of knowledge and understanding
- ▶ improve skill levels
- ▶ promote positive attitudes and values to work
- ▶ foster feelings of enjoyment, inspiration and creativity
- ▶ encourage actions and behaviour that progress the organisation and individuals
- ▶ enable the museum to be valued as part of a strong and safe community
- ▶ ensure the health and wellbeing of visitors and volunteers by providing better experiences for them
- ▶ facilitate the museum's active contribution to strengthening public life.

Questionnaires were sent to all WMMDO clients. 90 completed questionnaires were returned (a 16% fall in the return rate compared with the previous year). The return rate differed from county to county. While the Conurbation and Staffordshire recorded relatively robust returns, Shropshire recorded a response rate of only 23%, a significant drop, largely the result of the failure of the county's local authority museums to provide data.

The response of museums to the survey was:

### Improved levels of knowledge and understanding

79% of respondents reported that they felt more knowledgeable as a result of the work of their MDO. This represents a very slight drop on the previous year's figure of 82%.

"I value the network meetings for sharing information, working practices and identifying ways to connect and work together effectively; a very important and supportive element in heritage education during challenging economic times".

### Improved levels of skill

37% of respondents (40% in 2010/11) felt that they had become more capable and skilled in their work.

"The MDO arranges training programmes that contribute to our staff skill base and help our organisation to deliver best practice".

### Positive attitudes

49% of those who returned the survey reported that they felt inspired and enthusiastic as a result of contact with their MDO – virtually the same figure as in 2010/11.

"Our MDO has been vital in enthusing potential volunteers with the possibilities for promoting our local heritage".

### Confidence and motivation

44% of respondents (56% in 2010/11) said that they felt more confident and motivated as a result of the WMMDOs work.

"Our MDO is always positive and helpful and her "can do" attitude is very constructive and encouraging".

## Encouraging actions and behaviour that progress the organisation and the individual

40% of the museums (50% in 2010/11) reported that they felt increasingly successful and self-sufficient.

**“The support received has helped us to continue our development and professionalism and guide the museum on through an on-going transitional period”.**

## Providing better experiences for visitors and volunteers

58% (71% in 2010/11) agreed that they were able to provide a better experience for both visitors and volunteers.

**“The support of our MDO has always been vital to us as a small independent Museum. It is a source of information, advice and contacts, and these translate into tangible benefits for the Museum collection and our visitors”.**

## Facilitating the museum’s active contribution to strengthening public life

40% of respondents (50% in 2010/11) agreed that their museum was demonstrably valued by both visitors and local people, while 37% (46% the previous year) felt that they were seen as ‘an important contributor to local life’.

**“In this increasingly uncertain climate, where support for Museums continues to be eroded, the work of the MDO becomes ever more vital to the overall success of the heritage sector”.**



Looking at leeches, Doctor’s surgery, Newcastle-under-Lyme Museum.

As the satisfaction scores and associated comments given on the quality of support provided by the WMMDOs are uniformly complimentary, it seems that the overall fall in scores reflects a general pessimism and lack of confidence among respondents. It is clear from some of their other feedback that this is the result of wider concerns and uncertainty about the immediate future for the sector. While some local authorities are reducing investment in their museum services, the economic downturn also poses challenges to independent and volunteer-run museums, particularly in rural areas, as people have less money to spend on leisure activities. At the same time, the Big Society initiative has failed to deliver the increase in volunteer numbers that the government anticipated. Consequently, some museums feel very vulnerable indeed. There are also some concerns, particularly among volunteer run museums with a focus on industrial and social history, that the Arts Council might not properly understand their needs and aspirations.

The WMMDOs are uniquely able to address many of these concerns because of their strong relationship with the museums and heritage organisations that they serve. Indeed, many of their clients see their MDO as a bright light shining in a time of darkness. As one respondent commented, “The support we have received during a very negative period has been extremely helpful”.

Museums were also asked what they saw as the major strengths and successes of the MDO programme. A summary of responses, together with issues of concern, and areas for future development identified by respondent, is given in the following table.

“The support we have received during a very negative period has been extremely helpful”.

Areas where MDO intervention has been most successful	Areas of most concern to respondents
Improved collections management and documentation	Fundraising and income generation
Networking and links to other organisations	Volunteer recruitment, motivation and retention
Providing training and learning opportunities	Demands of Accreditation process on small museums
Support in achieving Accreditation	Collections Management and sustainability
Help in securing new volunteers	Impact of recession on museum resources
Signposting funding opportunities	Trustee recruitment and training
Funding support through grant schemes	Marketing on a shoe-string
Publicity and awareness raising	Uncertainty about the future of the museum development programme
Developing new skills especially around social media	Legislative compliance e.g. CRB checks
Support and advice for external funding applications e.g. HLF	Difficulties in promoting activities to schools as a result of educational reforms
Bespoke advice based on first-hand knowledge of client needs	Being left behind by developments in social Media
Brokering partnerships	Need for reassurance from ACE that smaller museums matter
Commissioning external advice via consultancies	Lack of specific roles/skills e.g. Education Officer

Major Training and support needs identified by respondents	Areas for future development identified by respondents
Volunteer training, motivation and management	Offsite/shared storage
Sustaining collections and collections care	Sustainable collaboration between museums
Displays and interpretation, with particular emphasis on access	Joint marketing initiatives, particularly for hard to reach audiences
Customer care/Welcome Host training	Support for Change Management
Marketing and promotion	Shared understanding around collecting policies
Addressing documentation backlogs	Shared digital platforms
Marking and labelling	Strengthening specialist interest groups in industrial and social history across the West Midlands
How to set up a friends group	Improving facilities for visitors with sensory disabilities
Better curriculum/school CPD awareness to ensure education provision matches teachers’ needs	

# New directions

Over the next three years, the WMMDOs plan to focus on four main areas of development:

- ▶ **Resilience of the Sector**
- ▶ **Organisational Health**
- ▶ **Collections**
- ▶ **Users and their experiences**

## Resilience

Strong advocacy from the WMMDOs to build awareness and understanding of the importance of the museum sector to the economic and cultural ecology will be crucial to promoting resilience. At the same time, there will be a focus on strengthening the county/sub-regional infrastructure and peer support in the West Midlands Counties. The WMMDOs will also investigate the business viability of continuing with the Fast Forward data survey, previously undertaken by MLA West Midlands.

## Organisational Health

In order to promote organisational health, the WMMDOs will focus their support for museums through three programme areas; *Great Governance*, *Green Museums* and *Valued Volunteers*. In order to strengthen governance, museums will be encouraged to develop sustainable and entrepreneurial practices.

In support of sustainability, the WMMDOs will promote the development of green initiatives. They will also encourage the creative recruitment, training and deployment, of volunteers and help develop the capacity of managers and institutions to work ethically and effectively with volunteers.

## Collections

Two programmes are planned which will help museums take better care of their collections. *Making Space* will encourage museums to develop integrated strategies to maximise the use of available storage capacity. *Making Collections Count* will provide support to museums to enable them to respond effectively to issues surrounding future collections care needs and work to improve standards of care.

## Users and Their Experiences

In order to help museums engage more effectively with existing and potential audiences, support will be targeted in three areas; the use of digital and social media as audience engagement tools; improving the visitor experience through the better use of collections and other resources to maximise benefits to audiences and support learning opportunities; and greater involvement in tourism initiatives and promotional partnerships.

## Further information

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