

## Vision or hard nosed reality

Corrie Cheyne shows how an interpretive plan can be a vital part of the process of producing an accurate business plan and, hopefully, a successful funding application.

A thoroughly researched business plan is fundamental to any funding application. It demonstrates that the organisation has considered all the financial implications of a project in terms of capital costs, funding, revenue expenditure and income generation. Without a strong business plan, any funding application will fall at the first hurdle. But for heritage developments, a good business plan is likely to pull together several other plans.

One of its key starting points is the conservation management plan, a tool designed to support and inform the management of heritage assets. This must demonstrate a clear understanding of those assets, a key part of which is their significance in social and cultural terms, or 'heritage merit'.

Another starting point for the business plan is the audience development plan. This allows organisations to understand the market environment in which they operate. It provides a framework in which to consider wider objectives and what role audiences are to play in those, examines current and future audiences, and considers how to reach new ones.

For the conservation management and audience development plans to feed meaningfully into the business plan, there must also be some analysis of both visitor demand and the anticipated visitor experience. This is where the interpretive plan fits in. Essentially, it provides the specification for the visitor experience, responding to the needs of the project and to the existing visitor market opportunity.

The nature of the visitor experience is a major influence in determining the level of achievable visitor numbers and the associated income. Without a clear interpretive plan and design brief, any business plan merely speculates rather than forecasts what the visitor numbers and income will be. The interpretive plan therefore provides the substance to the assessment of the visitor experience – the meat on the bones, as it were.

The ongoing financial performance of the project is critically important. The business plan therefore needs to consider the impact of the visitor experience over the long term. It must balance the initial capital investment required to produce a high-quality exhibition with the ongoing costs required to maintain it. Exhibition lifecycles vary, but it is widely accepted that if changes are not implemented within five to seven years, then visitor numbers will decline. The interpretive plan has a significant role to play here in identifying how the visitor experience can be refreshed, and at what cost.

'Heritage merit' is central to any funding bid, and this directly includes how you will seek to engage audiences, broaden your audience base, enhance learning opportunities – in other words, how you will handle the interpretation. In many ways, the interpretive plan provides the vision and substance behind a project, and the ability to voice clearly and with conviction what it is you are seeking to do and the benefits this will bring.

When preparing a funding bid, here are some points to bear in mind:

- Clearly state the heritage merit of the project
- Use the findings of the audience development plan to drive the development of the interpretation
- Keep the visitor experience in mind when developing interpretation
- Set clear, measurable interpretive objectives
- Ensure that the design brief follows on from the objectives of the interpretive plan
- Ensure that the interpretation meets relevant national standards and best practice
- Only take interpretive approaches that are practical to maintain
- Provide plans for ongoing development and refreshment

Corrie Cheyne is an Interpretive Planner with Campbell & Co.  
corrie@campbelland.co.uk

Thank you to Paul Jardine, Principal Consultant, Jura Consultants, and Graham Black, Senior Lecturer in Museum and Heritage Management at Nottingham Trent University, who made valuable contributions to this article.

*There's no business like show business, but there are several businesses like accounting.*

*David Letterman*