

Plan it out - Interpreters guidelines

Do you need to put together an interpretation plan, but you're not sure where to start? The Interpret Scotland group is planning a series of quick-reference guides to the key stages of interpretation planning. The guides will be published on the IS website. When complete they'll give 'bullet point' introductions to the questions:

- What do you want to say?
- To whom do you want to say it?
- How do you want to say it?
- Is it working?

Of course, not all interpretation can follow a 'logical' sequence like this: the important thing with any project is to make sure that all aspects have been considered, and that the decisions made at any point are consistent with each other.

Gillian Findlay from the Scottish Museums Council and Mary Hudson from the National Trust for Scotland have been working on the guide to the second question, thinking about your audience. Here it is.

Understanding Your Audience

Do you know who your visitors are? For interpretation to be most effective the messages you provide must be of interest to them, be presented in a style that attracts them and be accessible through media they are comfortable using. There are simple ways to find out the information you need and these will help you use your resources most effectively.

Here are some questions to ask which will help you establish or review the profile of your visitors:

- **Who are your visitors?**
School parties or family groups? Mums and toddlers? Retired people? Office workers at lunchtime? Specialist groups? Coach parties? Walkers? What they want to know and how they want to find out will vary enormously.
- **Where do they come from?**
Are your visitors local, from elsewhere in the UK, or from overseas? If many speak another language, you could consider translating some of your materials.
- **How often do they visit?**
Do you have lots of repeat visitors who'd appreciate a regular change in your interpretation?
- **Why do they visit?**
What are their motivations? Does what you provide meet their expectations and can you cater to their interests? You need to be sure that the answers you offer match the questions they bring with them.

- **How long do visitors stay and what holds their interest the longest?**
Are there particular areas or tools that people seem most drawn to? Can you repeat this success to your advantage elsewhere?
- **What level of knowledge do they bring with them?**
Are your visitors already experts in the subject you are interpreting, or is it likely to be something new to them? Understanding this will help you provide the appropriate content.
- **What are their physical and learning needs?**
Every one has different access requirements and preferences for the way we gather information. It's useful to bear in mind that the kind of interpretation you might enjoy will not be shared by everyone.
- **Who isn't visiting and why?**
This is perhaps the most challenging question to answer, but one which is crucial if you are to encourage new visitors and broaden the appeal of your interpretation.

Remember, establishing your visitor profile is just a start. To ensure you are communicating as well as you can, you need to act on your findings and regularly carry out a review.

For more on understanding your visitors, try these resources:

SNH guidelines on Interpretive Planning
www.snh.org.uk/ww0/Interpretation/default.html

The Scottish Museums Council
www.scottishmuseums.org.uk

The Visitor Studies Group, a UK based group working to develop and promote best practice in the area www.visitors.org.uk

Jenni Fuchs, Visitor Studies Officer at the National Museums of Scotland, also recommends these resources on visitor studies and evaluation techniques:

The Australian Museum Audience Research Centre www.amonline.net.au/amarc/

The Evaluation and Visitor Research Special Interest Group, also in Australia
<http://amol.org.au/evrsig/>

Museums Libraries and Archives recommendations on measuring learning
www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/measuring_learning/default.aspx

The US based Visitor Studies organisation
www.visitorstudies.org

A site run by Roger Greenaway, who specialises in evaluation techniques
www.reviewing.co.uk/evaluation/index.htm

The Global Social Change Research Project's listing of sociology research methods
<http://gsociology.icaap.org/methods/>

Research Councils UK guide to evaluation
www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/evaluationguide_print.pdf

An interesting review of Visitor Research issues
www.visitors.org.uk/events/andrew.pdf