

Museum Interpretation

Over the past four months the Scottish Museums Council has conducted a sample survey of its members to examine the state of their interpretation.

Museums across Perthshire, Dumfries and Galloway, and Highland region were questioned about their experience of interpretive planning, interpretive standards, evaluation, funding and barriers to change.

The results show there is considerable scope for improvement:

- Only 68% understand the term interpretation at least in part, leaving 32% who do not.
- Only 8% have an Interpretive Strategy and few plan for their interpretation beyond display themes.
- Interpretation is ranked as high priority by 32% of museums; 20% rank it as low priority.
- Although 72% are aiming for standards, only 48% are actually implementing them. Standards relating to physical access are more widely known than standards in intellectual access.
- Local authority staff have better access to support material than those in independent museums. Few are actively using reference material when developing interpretive provision.
- Evaluation methods are too imprecise to prompt change. Few museums really understood their visitors or evaluate their interpretation.
- There is little sustained input of funds into interpretation. Exhibition budgets are small and only 52% have sought funding from external sources.
- The main barriers to change are lack of time and resources, attitudes of staff or governing bodies, and lack of technical skill. Lack of skill in interpretive planning and production is a further concern.

SMC will now explore practical support and advice solutions to help bring about change. Further details are available from Emma Morehouse, Museums Officer with SMC, Tel 0131 476 8594.