
re:source

Introducing the new body for museums, archives and libraries

April 2000 saw the phasing out of the Museums and Galleries Commission and the Library and Information Commission, and the launch in their stead of a new strategic body: *re:source*, the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries. Funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, *re:source*'s annual budget for 2000-2001 is £22 million. Locum Directors **Tim Ambrose** and **Tony Hodges** went to discuss progress to date and the future of the new organisation with its Chairman, **Matthew Lord Evans**. Tim Ambrose reports on their meeting.

Shortly after its inception, *re:source* published its official manifesto in July 2000, in order to define its core values and future agenda. The manifesto was drawn up through extensive consultation with the three 'domains' of museums, archives and libraries, eliciting huge interest within these fields. The Chairman of *re:source* since its launch, Lord Evans, feels that the consultation process was important in helping to allay suspicion about the new organisation and sees the manifesto as an important rite of passage for *re:source*. The manifesto helps to capture the notion and spirit of the new body, and at the same time demonstrates that his new Board, who were all in place before its publication, have signed up to the principle that there are commonalities (as well as differences) between the three domains.

He is grateful to his 15 Board members for their help in developing the manifesto and for their all-round support. Members have been carefully chosen to provide an appropriate balance of experience and expertise at national, regional and local level, geographical representation from across the UK, sectoral representation and gender.

Challenges and objectives

One of the key challenges facing *re:source* is to forge a sectoral identity encompassing the estimated 2,500 museums, 4,500 libraries and 1,000 archives in the UK. Each domain has traditionally had long-established structures that have helped maintain an individual identity. Evans sees huge opportunities for cross-sectoral working between the three domains, especially in the application of the new information and communications technologies to the collections they all hold, in order to provide new forms of integrated on-line resources for the learning society of the future. There are already encouraging signs that existing bodies in the regions, such as the well-respected Area Museums Councils, wish to mirror central arrangements and bring the domains closer together through new working partnerships at regional level. These sectoral partnerships should also help in the development of the new Regional Cultural Consortia being promoted by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

In the Northeast of England, agencies concerned with the three domains are developing a mini-*re:source*, which can serve as a test bed for other areas. *re:source* will seek to encourage such arrangements, while at the same time looking to strengthen the capabilities of the three domains individually. Evans has already



Tate Modern is one of many examples of good practice
Photograph courtesy of Marcus Leith

recognised the need to establish strategic Regional Archives Councils in order to align archives more effectively with libraries and museums, which have much stronger regional structures in place.

But cross-sectoral cooperation is not being encouraged for its own sake. Evans is quite clear that this must be seen as a means towards an end: to make a much greater impact on the ground and in the marketplace. He sees the application of the new information and communications technologies as helping to create cohesion within the sector and, critically, to encourage take-up and engagement on the part of customers, thereby changing the perception of the value of work being done. Internet access to cultural resources through such avenues as the People's Network will change users' attitudes to the ways in which they are being physically managed and being made accessible. New research by MORI commissioned by *re:source* and the Heritage Lottery Fund has shown that a third of people canvassed would like to see museums making objects more available and accessible, in the way libraries and archives do. Evans is passionate about the need for the three domains to do more to achieve this through new ways of working and through more effective marketing. He contrasts marketing success in the capital, at new developments such as Tate Modern, with the situation at regional and local level, where it is still rare to find specialist marketing people within cultural institutions.

The key challenge for *re:source*, Evans believes, is to get more people to go into and use museums, libraries and archives – almost full stop. Meeting this challenge will require greater attention to encouraging and developing marketing skills, providing high-quality education and study facilities, and securing better levels of funding.

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While he recognises that there is a need to persuade Government to continue to invest in the sector to support the knowledge economy, he is also quick to admit the importance of evaluation to help build the case-for-support to DCMS, other key departments such as DETR and DfEE, and Government departments in the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Assemblies.

Winning new investment

In order to convince Government of the need to provide additional funding, *re:source* needs reliable statistics; at present, there is a marked contrast between the well-developed data-gathering systems in use in libraries and the dearth of data for museums and galleries. Mechanisms to provide reliable statistics to show visitation and take-up of services need to be developed urgently.

The sector needs to be able to answer three fundamental questions when seeking investment from the public and private sectors (the latter of which Evans views as having an increasingly important role to play in funding terms): 'What is it we want to do?', 'What will it cost?', and, most important of all, 'What will it deliver on the ground to meet the public policy objectives of the Government and other stakeholders?' Evans believes that the Arts lobby has not yet grasped this last point and is still expecting more money without strings attached.

But in making the argument to Government for increased investment, the sector needs to speak with one voice – and thus coordination and championship are among the important roles that *re:source* has to play. *re:source* needs to be able to make a strong argument to Government, based on reliable statistics and trend data, that the investment being made by Government and others is having a fundamental impact at local, regional and national level.

Support and leadership

At this stage, Evans feels that the balance of *re:source*'s work programme is about right to achieve the necessary results in the first year of its operation. *re:source*'s planning objectives fall into three areas – strategic leadership, advocacy and advice – and progress against all of these is on target. He sees much of the advisory work of *re:source* as strategic leadership.

But he is not content to sit in London and rely on his staff for intelligence. He has recognised the importance of seeing things at first hand at local level and building understanding not only of the challenges that museums, archives and libraries are facing, but also the potential for change and development, using examples of good practice. Mention of Tate Modern is quickly matched by case examples from Leeds, Bradford, Exeter and Cambridge. And while comparators within England are important, so too is comparison with cultural services in other countries, including the three home countries. In a formal sense, given the new Governmental structures in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, *re:source*'s remit and role is limited to England. It is clear, however, that a UK-wide body can provide a range of support to all four countries; *re:source*'s Board members were deliberately selected with this in mind, ensuring that representatives from each country were among their number. Evans sees future relations with the three home countries being built through

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Tate modern Photograph courtesy of Marcus Leith



Lord Evans is determined to build strong ties on a regional basis
 Photograph courtesy of New Art Gallery, Walsall

re:source

The Council for
**Museums
 Archives
 and Libraries**

Board Members

- David Barrie, Director of the National Art Collections Fund
- Ajay Chowdhury, Managing Director, LineOne
- Maurna Crozier, Director of the Cultural Diversity Programme,
 Northern Ireland Community Relations Council
- Victor Gray, Head of Corporate Records and Archives,
 N.M. Rothschild and Sons Ltd
- Vivien Griffiths, Assistant Director of Libraries and Learning,
 Birmingham City Council
- Loyd Grossman, Writer and Broadcaster
- Nicholas Hodgson, Chief Executive of Derbyshire County Council
- Mark Jones, Director of the National Museums of Scotland
- Karen Knight, Director of Reading Museums and Archive Service
- Neil MacGregor, Director of the National Gallery
- Elizabeth Jane Ryder, Director of the Scottish Museums Council
- Michael Stevenson, Joint Director of Factual and Learning at the BBC
- Lola Young, Professor of Cultural Studies, Middlesex University
- Lan Watkin, Chief Officer for Libraries, Leisure and Culture,
 Wrexham County Council
- Mark Wood, Editor-in-Chief, Reuters Plc

Contact details

Director of Communications, **Julie Taylor**
 tel: +44 (20) 7233 4200
www.resource.org.uk

concordats, which would serve as articles of understanding, but it is as yet too early to say what form these may take given the early state of policy and structural development.

Further afield, he is interested in where the UK sits in the league table of cultural provision both in Europe and beyond. Judging what we are achieving in the context of Europe and internationally will be important for the future, not least in helping to argue for investment from European funding sources. *re:source* plans to set up an International Unit to help build on the work carried out by the three domains in the international sphere to date. In partnership with other Government agencies, such as the British Council and the DTI, it will seek to provide opportunities for practitioners in the sector to both export skills and to import experience of good practice from elsewhere.

All in all, Evans appreciates that it is not *re:source*'s job to wipe the slate clean and start afresh. He has to build on what is already in place and help to make it fit-for-purpose in the new economy. But he also has to look hard at the most efficient allocation of resources for the development of the sector. This means looking across Government to understand how resources are deployed and seeking to ensure that the investment that Government is making in capital and revenue terms is properly joined up, pushed in the right direction and making the right impact in terms of the Government's corporate objectives. At the same time, he and his team have to keep the sector 'on-side' and act as a champion and an advocate on their behalf to public and private sector bodies alike. It is a challenge that he is looking forward to.

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