

Manchester Art Gallery - Request for Proposals

Taking Stock Evaluation

January 2023-February 2025

1. Context

Manchester Art Gallery has been successful in securing a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund for a £113,000 project to undertake work re-thinking Manchester's civic collection.

The project takes advantage of a unique opportunity. In Spring 2023 we embark on a major capital project to address long-term structural issues at our Queen's Park collection stores. Queen's Park is a historic building set in a park in Harpurhey, a north-eastern suburb of the city. Built in 1884 it was the city's first purpose-built museum but it closed in the 1970s, becoming conservation studios and collections stores. It is the engine room for the city's Designated collections, housing fine art, sculpture, local history collections, arms and armour, and furniture. Over time, Queen's Park has become unfit for purpose with deteriorating infrastructure offering a very poor collections storage environment. Immediate work is needed to repair the roof, install a new heating system, and address a serious damp issue in the basement.

Manchester City Council and Arts Council England have committed over £3.5m to undertake the capital works which commenced in September 2023, but in order for these invasive works to happen the whole collection housed there (5246 objects) is being decanted and moved to Manchester Art Gallery where they will be temporarily housed in the large exhibition galleries on the second floor. Not only does this avoid the significant costs of offsite storage, it offers an unprecedented opportunity for public access to our entire collection in the city centre, and a way for visitors to fully appreciate the extent of the city's collection.

Queen's Park is not open to the public. The location of the site, no on-site access for people with disabilities, and security issues mean that it remains 'under the radar' for most residents of the city. While we have longer term plans to address this, it is likely to remain inaccessible for the foreseeable future. However, we know from those few individuals that do visit (researchers, project participants, donors) how wondrous a behind the scenes look at the vast collection can be. The temporary re-housing at Manchester Art Gallery offers the opportunity to create a similar experience for many more people. The grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund is enabling this to happen, allowing us to create controlled and secure access to the space and to undertake a programme of engagement work.

In addition, 2023/24 is the Gallery's 200th anniversary, an ideal time to launch a re-evaluation of '200 years of stuff', addressing the frequently asked questions about what museums and galleries collect and why, how objects are acquired, conserved and stored, and what the role of museums and galleries is now and will be in the future.

2. Taking Stock

The Taking Stock project marks a fundamental shift in the way we understand and use collections; a new way of working, that takes a creative and sustainable approach with and for the people of Manchester - to whom it belongs.

Collecting is a fundamental human activity – the material expression of humanity, history, identity, and sense of belonging. Our 200-year-old civic collection is wide-ranging and eclectic, evidencing who and what we have been - and who we could be. It is a creative resource of infinite potential, in which we can all find something of our present and future selves if the conditions of encounters are right. Taking Stock will identify those conditions, interrogating the systems and structures that have upheld particular values and ideologies to the exclusion of others, and prioritised a dominant set of narratives at the expense of other, often less comfortable, truths. For 20+ years, resources have focused on large scale exhibitions. Displays have evolved over time, but so much of our collection isn't seen.

Moving stored collections temporarily to Manchester Art Gallery gives us a unique opportunity to collectively audit, research, record, and plan its future, and create the conditions for new understanding, knowledge and ideas to be developed collaboratively. Using the principles of care – of objects and collections, of ourselves and others – we will explore models of collections engagement beyond conventional modes of display and exhibition.

This new approach to programming will be informed by the principles of social capital and slow working - inhabiting a work-in-progress state of mind characterised by relationships of trust, playfulness, and collective learning and decision-making, actively underpinned by our commitment to anti-racism and decolonisation. Although our digital collections access is relatively well advanced, much more can be done. A new, fully trained volunteer team will create and upload new photography, written, audio and audio-visual content. While all our collections need this level of attention, we have identified four underused areas to test this approach: furniture, Old Manchester, Global Textiles and the Rutherford Loan Collection. Together these form a history of the city and institution, with rich stories of place making and the construction of the city's identity. This work will be visible on-site and through digital channels. The 'treasure house'- of collections from storage – and the work around it – will be visible at all times in a dynamic exhibition and activity space on the first floor, we'll share recently unearthed objects, host public curatorial conversations and deliver live conservation work. We'll create a gallery space telling the story of the project, engaging all of our visitors in discussion. We'll work with a significant number of new volunteers to help us deliver this work. We'll deliver workshops that explore ideas around collecting, civic pride, and museums and colonialism. We'll host teacher training, wellbeing sessions and professional engagement for sector colleagues. We will work with young people in secondary and higher education to learn more about what areas of the collection most interest them.

3. Evaluation

An extensive evaluation, spanning the entire project, has been written into the project plan and is funded by NLHF as part of the grant. This will ensure that the project is kept on track, and that all lessons learned through this new way of working are noted and used to inform future work.

Throughout the project, the evaluator will support us to evidence and articulate the value of the work done to date, maintain and develop clarity of thought and communication, unpick and challenge obstacles to progress, and make best use of the project data to lever support for further work.

We have already appointed a specialist consultant to undertake a piece of work within the project. Jenny Durrant will work with the Manchester Art Gallery team to write a collections disposal framework which will inform the long-term future of the collection. This work will be delivered through three workshops. We anticipate there may be some cross over between this work and the evaluation work described in this brief.

4. Evaluation tasks

Working with the team to set targets and desired outcomes for the evaluation at the start of the project.

- Determine the best evaluation processes and models for all elements of the project.
- Use recent project evaluation undertaken at Manchester Art Gallery and Platt Hall to inform and enhance the Taking Stock project and its evaluation.
- Draw together all the activity, feedback, findings, successes and mistakes and create a compelling narrative that can be used to determine the future direction of travel for working with the collection.
- Be a critical friend: someone who will feed in learning and updates on an ongoing basis, get involved, ask good questions, check our thinking, and provide challenge.

Identify organisational barriers to progress and make recommendations on addressing these.

- Working with the Manchester Museums Partnership Data Manager, analyse, interpret and report on data (qualitative and quantitative) as it is collected to inform future work and to evidence success.
- Identify gaps in data collection that would enhance this project and undertake additional research to meet those gaps, as required.
- Evaluate the relationship with volunteers, educators, project participants and visitors, and make recommendations on how existing relationships can be sustained and further relationships developed through new ways of working with the collection.
- Identify how the project is helping the Gallery to communicate the importance of the collection to local residents.
- Input into regular changes in the dedicated gallery space where we will tell the story of the project through objects, activities and film.
- Provide content and evidence that will support our applications for further funding from multiple external funders, and work with the Development Team to develop new on-site giving messages.
- Produce a series of reports, charting the progress of the project.
- Deliver in-person feedback to staff groups on the progress of the project.
- Attend in-person and online Project Team and one to one meetings where necessary.

5. Budget

We hold a budget of £12k for evaluation to include all expenses (usually capped at 10% of fee).

A fee instalment schedule will be drawn up to reflect the proposed work pattern, with the balance payable on receipt of the final report.