

In Gloucestershire 21 people from 12 museums have participated in a development programme that combined a traditional training day, visits by a consultant and self assessment using a simple benchmark system, all leading to measurable improvements in collections care. The museums that participated ranged from small privately owned museums right up to a national museum. This report examines how the value of a traditional training day can be augmented by integration into wider systems and how the benefits can be measured.

Training in response to needs

The programme was initiated when Jane Marley, Co-Ordinator for Gloucestershire Museums, carried out a training needs survey. From her evaluation, a programme of four elements was devised, one of which was collection care training. Jane conceived the programme influenced both by her role as an MDO and by her other life as a hands-on working curator of a museum. As a curator, Jane receives regular visits from a conservator and finds them valuable in raising collection standards care quickly. She therefore wanted to combine training with site visits and individually tailored advice.

Organisation

The training programme was funded largely by grants from the South West Museum Council and Gloucestershire County Council. Partnership funds were generated by 'in kind' contributions. This included an amount calculated to reflect the input of the museum staff who were required to carry out a self assessment in advance of the training day and a development programme afterwards. None of the participating museums had to find a cash contribution. To set up the programme, Jane Marley organised a briefing meeting inviting me, as trainer, to discuss the individual museums and their needs. We reviewed the results of the recent SWMC Mapping Project and it quickly became obvious that the self assessment used for this project should form the basis of the training programme.

SWMC Self Assessment Pack

The SWMC self assessment pack had been developed by the Museums Council to help them target their grant aid and to help museums plan and measure improvements in collections care. The first Mapping Project for the South West was published in 1999. The project looked at the nature of the museums and their collections and at standards of access and collections care. The collections care benchmarks were developed from initiatives taken by MGC and other Museum Councils and focus on four key areas: Environment; Housekeeping & Security; Storage and Documentation. For each of these categories there are six levels of care from the bare minimum, through registration standard (level three) up to level six, which for many museums could best be described as aspirational. Within the levels there are a number of simple statements against which the museums assess their practice. We were interested to see if it would be possible to show that training costs could be justified with improvements in benchmark scores.

Self assessment

Participants were asked to complete and return the self assessment and the results were analysed, looking both at individual features of the returns and global issues across the whole group. As discovered in the Museums Council's 1999 survey, the strongest area for the whole group was documentation, possibly because of Registration and a recent SWMC/mda training programme. In the 1999 survey the weakest area was storage but for the Gloucester group the weakest area was the environment. An interesting feature was that two items in the same level occasionally has significantly different results. For example 58% reported that they had

conservation grade packaging, but only 33% reported that they had inert storage furniture and materials. Another odd result was that two thirds of respondents agreed that they had taken specialist advice in housekeeping and security but only 40% had followed up that advice.

Devising the programme

The results of the self assessment informed the training programme and meant that the day was pitched at a higher level than would have been suggested without the results. Level 5 of the environment checklist was identified as a key turning point. None of the participant museums agreed that they had:

- a full monitoring programme
- control of the environment for 75% of the time
- correct conditions for specialist collections for 75% of the time

Only 2 museums interpreted their environmental records, which is a little frustrating, as half of the group are monitoring and recording U/V, light, temperature and relative humidity. These issues combined with low scores on identifying vulnerable objects, risk assessment and following up specialist advice meant the day concentrated on environmental conditions, but with a view to prioritising what was important for the individual museums and setting targets to respond to real threats to collections. My sense was that museums collect environmental data out of a sense of duty (perhaps inspired by enthusiastic conservators) but feel alienated from recommendations for environmental control and are unable to formulate appropriate targets and control strategies to achieve these targets.

Training

The training day was held at the Jenner Museum where the hosts kindly allowed delegates to wander freely, notepads in hand, looking for hidden dangers. The content of the day was based around the Framework for the Preservation of Museum Collections developed by the Canadian Conservation Institute which describes nine agents of deterioration (decay) such as direct physical forces, fire, water and incorrect temperature. This framework also looks at control strategies based on fire prevention which are: Avoid, Block, Detect Respond, Recover/Treat. To illustrate, a strategy for avoiding light damage would be to have no windows, blocking light is achieved by hanging curtains. Recover/Treat is the category that best describes interventive conservation. The training day looked at: categorising and identifying hazards, working out how damage to collections could be measured (easier for some hazards than for others) and then how to act, prioritising avoidance and blocking, over the more costly and time consuming Recover/Treat. The participants all carried out a systematic risk assessments and this helped to identify which threats would merit the greatest attention from museum staff. The hazard spotting exercise identified many potential threats to objects on open display, but the risk assessment helped identify what really mattered.

Action

At the end of the day delegates produced an action plan. These ranged from the overwhelming (three years of hard labour to my eyes), to the sharply focused. Interestingly the size of the plan bore no direct resemblance to the size of the museum, nor of the balance between Local Authority and private. Instead they reflected the participant's own sense of the time that they could commit to the work. No one, however, decided to do nothing.

About two months later each museum had a follow up visit from the trainer who discussed their self assessment and their action list. Following the visit individual reports were

produced to a standard framework. Despite the standard approach the areas of work recommended varied widely. Targets ranged from making a list of the collections through to developing operating manuals for industrial collections.

Evaluation

Finally, after several months, participants were asked to evaluate the exercise and report on progress. Every respondent had undertaken tasks identified at the end of the training day, all but one had acted on the advice received and 78% had increased the number of self assessment items that they had achieved. At this simple level the programme has resulted in action. Only one respondent felt that they have changed their priorities for collections care, yet 78% of respondents also agreed that they had prioritised tasks that were described on the self assessment list. This may seem contradictory, but suggests that although participants felt they were doing things they had always planned to do, they had got on with collection care activities faster as a result of the programme. Perhaps the programme had also more sharply focused their own priorities bringing them into line with the issues identified in the self assessment pack.

We also used the evaluation to find out why expert advice had not been acted on. All of those who agreed they had not acted on advice commented that it was because that advice was unrealistic. One of the aims of the programme was to help participants to learn how to prioritise their own needs which we had hoped meant the action plans would be relevant, owned and unlikely to be disregarded as irrelevant. The visits also ensured that the broader issues covered in training were pinned down to specific practical issues that the participants could relate to.

The greatest success in my view is that everyone is now working on their collection care action plan, are working towards higher levels in the self assessment and yet feel at ease with these areas of work. I am convinced that the benchmarks ensured that the most important areas were considered, the risk assessment and task list ensured that participants drew up their own targets and the visits and reports meant that participants were encouraged to get on with things and were assisted in working towards recognised standards of practice. As a format it has proved more expensive than a simple training day, but with all participants working towards agreed goals and achieving change it has been a demonstrable success. The Gloucester Museums co-ordinator concluded that the programme raised standards substantially and plans to continue with the programme. Furthermore SWMC had viewed the exercise as a pilot study and are now actively encouraging other groups of museums to organise similar programmes.

Costs

<i>The Collections Care programme - total project cost</i>	<i>£7,623</i>
<i>Cost of trainer</i>	<i>£3,554</i>

Funding

<i>South West Museum Council</i>	<i>£4,389</i>
<i>Gloucestershire County Council</i>	<i>£400</i>
<i>In kind contributions</i>	<i>£2,834</i>

In kind contributions included free/reduced fees for venues and refreshments, secretarial expenses and the contribution of the volunteers in the museums

Jane Henderson
Collections Care Consultancy
May 2001

Note to editor.

To cut you could lose one of the two italic parts which cover the same issue in different format.