

Science Museum Group Research Policy

Context

The museums in the Science Museum Group¹ share a mission to engage people in a dialogue about the history, present and future of human ingenuity in the fields of science, technology, medicine, transport and media.

The National Heritage Act 1983 requires us to preserve, care for and add to the collection, to exhibit them to the public and to make them available for study and research, and to promote the public's enjoyment and understanding of science and technology and of the development of those subjects.

SMG's strategic priorities set out our vision to be internationally recognised for our creative exploration of how innovation, science, technology, engineering, medicine, transport, media, and industry created and sustain modern society. Our research provides a basis with which to achieve several of our strategic aims:

- Aspire to the highest international museum standards in the care and preservation of the collection, scholarship, display, programming, learning and advocacy for our subject areas;
- Strengthen our core narratives and deliver dynamic gallery displays and public spaces
- Implement clear audience strategies that focus on providing life-enhancing experiences
- Extend our reach nationally and internationally

Whilst each Museum has its own distinct history, identity and ambitions, we recognise the opportunities we have as a Group and our capacity to be greater than the sum of our parts. The strength of the overall SMG collection is central to realising these opportunities.

Vision

SMG research will provide the United Kingdom with a world-class capability to broaden and deepen public engagement with SMG's collection and with narratives of science, technology, engineering, industry, medicine, civil transport and media relevant to the Group museums' short, medium and long-term cultural programmes. Research will also support and inform organisational activities and collection care.

Scope

The Science Museum Group undertakes research to increase its long-term capacity to use its collection to engage public interest in the role of science and technology past, present and future. Research, of many kinds and conducted by staff within all professional areas, is the life blood of major museums like ours. SMG research, conducted at every level from fact-checking to academic-style publication, will everywhere be characterised by rigour and traceability to reliable sources. SMG will work to enable its staff and associates to develop their research skills to the highest quality appropriate to

¹ Science Museum, London; Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester; National Media Museum, Bradford; National Railway Museum, York and Shildon

each project or activity. The vast majority of our research effort is aligned with major projects within the annual business plans, but research to develop the understanding to enable future projects is also encouraged and undertaken. The museums will work to international standards of best practice and seek to become world leaders in the production of original knowledge and new research methods. We support both research more narrowly targeted at the production of particular outputs (such as specific displays) and broader academic research (that is research of university quality that informs both museum displays and websites but also publications and presentations for academic audiences).

Science Museum Group research will build original knowledge of wide applicability in three broad areas, the SMG 'Meta-Themes':

- A. The Material Culture of Science – which promotes study of our collection (and places), including conservation research.
 - The histories of science, technology, industry, medicine, civil transport, and media, with a special stress on their material and visual cultures as represented in the Museums' collection, datasets representing the collection, and beyond.
 - Conservation research: The technology and structure of items in the collection; the study of materials, deterioration, conservation and preservation of items in the collection; the study of museum environments for display and storage, including both conservation and environmental sustainability.
- B. The Public Culture of Science and Technology – which encompasses research into public history, audiences and the historical public culture of science, technology, engineering, industry, medicine, civil transport, and media.
 - Public History strand: Public engagement with the histories of science, technology, industry, medicine, civil transport, and media, including studies of the lay historical imagination; means to enhance engagement; and the policy and historiographical implications of bridging lay and academic historical understanding.
 - Historical studies of relations between the public and science, technology, industry, medicine, civil transport, and media, including studies of media of science communication, their role and impact; the museums' own history; and the role of lay people in science and technology.
 - Audiences that engage (and do not engage) with our collection through exhibitions, educational visits, web access and otherwise.
 - Science Capital: understanding how scientific, technological, engineering and mathematical knowledge resources enable engagement and generate forms of social advantage.
 - Citizen science: using museums as the stage for scientific projects including lay participation.
 - Research into achieving the most effective practice in museum displays and programming.
- C. Science, Technology and the Arts – which enables research that relates science, technology, industry, medicine, civil transport, and media with the literary, visual and musical arts.

Framework for Research

The Science Museum Group will, within its long-term strategy and annual business plans, set out priorities and timescales in each area of research, identifying the staff and other resources needed, establishing outputs and their use and dissemination.

Resources

Research will be funded externally and internally, in partnership with organisations from the UK and overseas. It will be undertaken by the permanent staff and also by fixed-term staff employed for the purpose, by students and research associates, and in partnership with staff from other museums, universities and archives and, where appropriate, with volunteers. We aspire to make it possible, via funding and resource management, to enable staff to undertake concentrated periods of research and

writing. To meet its aims to develop and make useful its collection and expertise, the Science Museum Group also encourages and facilitates access by external researchers, especially via the Science Museum's Dana Research Centre and Library, NRM's Search Engine, NMeM's Insight and MSI's Collections Centre.

All research that consumes Museum resources, including staff time, is managed in accordance with the programmes and this policy, and will be embedded in individuals' annual objectives. There is a strong presumption in favour of external funding of research, wherever that is possible. External resources for research projects will be sought from any appropriate funder; SMG is an Independent Research Organisation of AHRC and ESRC and expects to continue to fund research from these RCUK bodies, as well as from trusts and foundations, and from the EU. All such applications are approved by the SMG Grants Review Group before submission.

Management

The Science Museum's Research & Public History Department – part of the Curatorial and Library & Archives Department, and located within the Dana Research Centre and Library – acts as a centralised resource to advocate, enable and deliver research across SMG. The Department has a primary emphasis on academic level research into the historical and collection-related aspects of the meta-themes at the Science Museum; it works collaboratively with colleagues in Learning and Collections Services and in the other SMG museums to facilitate their research ambitions. In line with other Independent Research Organisations, it provides a base for internal and external staff and postgraduate students (including our cohort of AHRC-funded collaborative Doctoral students) undertaking concentrated periods of research. The Department's enabling function includes expertise in conceiving and (co-)writing grant applications to research funders; working with line managers, it provides advice, training and mentorship to staff and students to enable them to develop their skills in research and publication. It acts nimbly to identify funding opportunities and research collaborators; it will continue to develop expertise in grant application and delivery. The Science Museum's Head of Research & Public History is responsible for coordinating reports on research to the SMG Collection & Research Trustee Sub-Committee (CORE).

Outputs

SMG research is expected to be disseminated both via specific museum media, including displays and events, but also via more academic routes such as publication in refereed journals (including the [Science Museum Group Journal](#)), in books and via seminars and conferences for academic and professional audiences.

Aspirations

Excellent research will become embedded in all relevant activities and become characteristic of the Museums' conduct and outputs. Whenever the museums want to put on a display, understand a collection or research an aspect of audience behaviour, we will – or at least will consider undertaking – a funded academic research project. Research will directly impact on the direction and quality of the cultural products that we present to visitors and our stewardship of the collection.

Tim Boon, Head of Research & Public History, 16 February 2016

Appendix A: Key SMG Themes

Research activity will always be pursued in accordance with the subject priorities enunciated in SMG's long term strategic ambitions set out by the Board of Trustees from time to time, and will be adjusted to respond to these as they are updated.

Current Science Museum science themes for the decade are:

- Climate science and sustainability, including population, food and energy.
- The history and future of medicine.
- Informatics (and the science of data)
- Understanding the universe

The NMeM explores the science, technology and art of the still and moving image, and its impact on our lives. Research priorities include:

- The histories of photography, film and television and their applications in other fields;
- The impact of digital technologies on imaging;
- The role of museums in their communities.

MSI's key curatorial themes are:

- The interplay of science, industry and society
- The first industrial city: challenges and solutions
- The connected city
- City of ideas
- The consumer city
- Urban health

The NRM explores:

- The origins of the railways and the science and technology behind their development;
- The impact of railways on people's lives, and
- How railways shaped our world and culture.

Appendix B: Science Museum Group: Why we do Research

Research* is essential to the authenticity and integrity of the Science Museum Group's work. It is a core component of SMG's activity because:

- We aspire to the highest intellectual standards for understanding our collection and audiences, and for developing the new narratives that will underpin our displays and programmes.
- All great museums conduct research at this level; our peers and stakeholders expect us to do the same.
- Strikingly little research has been conducted into our collection compared to our peer institutions. This lack provides a major opportunity for SMG to gain influence by delivering a world class research programme.
- Conducting research involves exposure to – and engagement with – the world's most insightful scholars and the latest thinking on the subjects we represent.
- Conducting research develops the expertise of staff and delivers rewards to them in terms of institutional commitment and the recognition they receive.
- Our research-active staff act as ambassadors, building networks of influence and benefit to SMG.
- Research produces goods – including publications and conferences – that extend the influence of the museums' work
- Collaborations that arise from research – such as our doctoral programme and MSc teaching – develop new cohorts of well qualified potential future staff members.
- Our research interests coincide with many of the funding priorities of RCUK, trusts and foundations, which renders many of our research needs eminently fundable. Such common interest may support research of four broad kinds:
 - Core research for displays and programmes
 - Unlocking the potential of valuable, but unknown, areas of the collection
 - Developing and implementing meta-themes[†] to develop SMG's research reputation and influence (including research into aspects of museum policy).
 - Research into aspects of museum policy, such as access to the collection and digital assets.

In short, research can renew our practice, enhancing the originality, reliability and relevance of all our work.

* Here the term 'research' principally means academic level research; that is, original investigation using primary sources, capable of publication in refereed journals where it would carry an apparatus of references. This is not the only kind of research conducted in the SMG Museums, but it establishes standards of rigour that guide all the investigation we do, including data-gathering, drawing from secondary and tertiary accounts and consulting experts. These other kinds of research have been – and in many cases continue to be – sufficient for some of our purposes.

[†] These high level themes are: The Public Culture of Science and Technology; Science, Technology and the Arts; and The Material Culture of Science and Technology.