



department for
**culture, media
and sport**

DCMS Museum Peer Review Pilot

National Portrait Gallery

improving
the quality
of life for all

Our aim is to improve the quality of life for all through cultural and sporting activities, support the pursuit of excellence, and champion the tourism, creative and leisure industries.

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Chapter 1: Background

1.1 The DCMS self-assessment and peer review pilots for museums.

Following the publication in January 2008 of the report *Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement* by Sir Brian McMaster, DCMS has been taking action to implement the recommendations made in the review. One major part of this implementation programme is to develop and instigate a self-assessment and peer review process for museums in receipt of Grant-In-Aid funding from DCMS.

This process has been developed by DCMS with input from the museums sector. Three pilot reviews have taken place in November and December of 2008, at the National Portrait Gallery, the Natural History Museum and Tyne & Wear Museums. DCMS is considering the results of these pilots and the process involved, with a view to further developing a review system to roll out to all DCMS sponsored museums beginning in 2009/10. The results of these pilots will also stand as the baseline reviews for the three institutions involved.

Ahead of its review the National Portrait Gallery was asked to complete a self-assessment based upon six questions. A panel of three reviewers was then chosen, with agreement from both DCMS and the Gallery, to include individuals with a suitable range of expertise. The review panel for the National Portrait Gallery consisted of:

- Dr Kevin Fewster, Director of the National Maritime Museum.
- Sir William Proby, ex-Chairman of the National Trust.
- Dr Deborah Swallow, Märit Rausing Director of the Courtauld Institute.

The panel was asked, over a three day period, to examine the functions and strategic direction of the Gallery, evaluate the Gallery in terms of its self-assessment and identify both areas of excellence and opportunities for development. This was achieved through discussions with the Chairman of the board of trustees, the Director, the Executive Team and management of most operational areas. The panel also toured the front of house and back of house facilities. The review panel would like to express their thanks to everyone at the National Portrait Gallery for the time, energy and enthusiasm they contributed to the review process.

This review will act as a benchmark against which future reviews of the Gallery will be compared. All views represented in this document are those of the review panel. A secretariat function was provided by DCMS officials. DCMS would like to thank the review panel and all involved at the Gallery for the time given to the review.

The McMaster report has indicated that in order to deliver excellence, cultural institutions should aim to:

- Provide life changing experiences for individuals.
- Show creativity and innovation.
- Be willing to take risks and experiment.
- Develop an international reputation.
- Be open to everyone.
- Present both relevant and challenging concepts to the public.

1.2 The National Portrait Gallery

The National Portrait Gallery houses a nationally important and internationally prestigious collection. The Primary Collection of paintings, sculpture, miniatures, drawings, prints and photographs contains some 10,870 portraits of eminent British figures. Of these more than 4,150 are paintings, sculptures and miniatures, approaching 60% of which are regularly displayed. In the 1960s the Photographs Collection was revitalised and in 1969 portraits of living people were for the first time admitted to the collection. The Gallery has extensive reference collections relating to portraiture (240,000 photographs, 80,000 prints and drawings and over 600,000 images and other items). The collections are used as a national resource and form an image bank that can be used for reproduction, study and exhibition.

The collection has been displayed at St Martin's Place in Westminster since 1896, with the Ondaatje Wing built in 2000, providing additional space. There has been a ten year programme of buildings renewal. The NPG has ongoing partnerships with Montacute House in Somerset, Beningbrough Hall in Yorkshire (both National Trust properties) and at Bodelwyddan Castle in Clwyd, Wales. There are also other ongoing loan and display arrangements with other galleries and historic houses.

In 2007/08 the NPG received 1.65 million visits, of which 162,000 were by children aged 15 and under and 567,000 were from overseas visitors. Its website received 14.9 million unique visits. In the same year the Gallery received Grant-In-Aid funding from DCMS totalling £7.04 million which equates to £4.27 for each visit, the lowest such figure for any national museum. The funding for 2008/09 is £7.69 million, £0.64 million of which is funding for capital projects.

Further information regarding visitor figures and funding agreements can be found for all museums sponsored by DCMS on the department's web-site http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/museums_and_galleries/default.aspx

Chapter 2: Judgement of Excellence in Central Museum Functions

The peer review highlighted a number of areas in which the National Portrait Gallery is excellent.

- 2.1 The National Portrait Gallery is a nimble, creative, fast moving and aspirational organisation that uses its relatively small size to its advantage. It is self confident and has the ability and expertise needed to seize upon its opportunities. This has been demonstrated, for example, through collaborations with Vanity Fair magazine where the Gallery took the lead role and the BBC's 'Great Britons' project.
- 2.2 The Gallery itself is a buzzing, exciting place with something on offer for all audiences. The freedom given to the curators to present the collection in new and innovative ways is obvious, as is the thought given to what the visitor might experience and learn from the exhibits. This is made particularly clear through the engaging way in which the permanent hangs are done, the changing programme of small displays and the utilisation of items from the Gallery's reference collection to complement the portraits from the primary collection. Innovative architectural practice has also enabled the Gallery to make the most of its space and a lot of work has been done to improve access for people with disabilities.
- 2.3 The leadership (including the Trustees) and staff are passionate about the public facing responsibilities of the Gallery. Great advances in access and learning have been made at no expense to the scholarly work which is carried out to an excellent standard.

The review panel was impressed by the breadth and depth of the NPG's learning programmes. There was a clear sense that senior management regarded learning as a core element of the Gallery's mission to share knowledge and understanding about the collection. The review team thought the interpretation within the galleries was done in a manner that made the collection accessible to general visitors and self-guided groups including schools, families and adults. The schools programme was clearly successful and over-subscribed, with the number of school visits the Gallery can accommodate being limited by the physical constraints of the site.

The learning team's success, for instance, in creating a Youth Forum was considered to be innovative as were the use of video conferencing technology with schools and the links developed with Barnado's and hospital schools. The reviewers thought the NPG's work with a range of generally non-visiting and under represented audiences – including families from minority ethnic groups, looked after and vulnerable young people and young people not in employment and education – demonstrated a willingness to take risks and push the boundaries of its engagement. The review team was impressed by the NPG's use of interdisciplinary expertise – educators, artists and curators – to provide audiences with insight and engagement with the collection in order to encourage an inspiring learning experience.

- 2.4 The NPG runs an exemplary National Programme and has forged successful long-term partnerships with a selection of regional museums in England and with the National Trust. The reviewers were particularly impressed that the NPG reaches out beyond the hub

museums to local museums and historic houses throughout the country, particularly in the North East and South West.

- 2.5 The reviewers considered the NPG's exhibition programme to be of high quality. There is a balanced schedule of shows and the exhibition planning is done expertly. The NPG has six exhibitions a year, a mixture of charging and free shows, and has a forward programme with some sponsorship in place for the next 3 years. The reviewers considered this to be both impressive and encouraging in the current economic climate.

The exhibition programme demonstrates the clear self confidence of the institution and the knowledge that they have of their business model and audience. The balance of shows, in terms of period, subject and medium appeals to a variety of audiences and in some ways acts as a bridge to the collection for young people and new audiences.

Through its exhibitions the Gallery also demonstrates its internationalism, sending and receiving shows abroad and using successful exhibitions as a springboard for commercial opportunities and professional links.

- 2.6 The research work of the Gallery was identified as being excellent and has been recognised as such by the award of Independent Research Organisation (IRO) status by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The reviewers noted the commitment of the senior management to develop in the Gallery's in house research capability and expertise and to provide resources for this to be achieved.

The reviewers thought the Gallery utilises its research competence intelligently to underpin its other activities such as developing exhibitions and learning programmes. The Gallery's in-house expertise in technical analysis has led to international collaborations, notably with the ICN (Institute of Culture, Netherlands) and the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. The Gallery's research expertise led directly to the approach from Vanity Fair to stage the 'Vanity Fair Portraits' exhibition which in turn led to a successful book publication. The Gallery has also collaborated with the Dictionary of National Biography to provide images for this internationally respected resource.

There is a desire from the senior management to continue to improve the archive service for self-directed research through the digitisation of the collection and by making it available via the Gallery's website.

- 2.7 The management team of the NPG brings together individuals with a high level of expertise from a range of different backgrounds. The relatively small number of staff overall means that individuals working in different departments have an opportunity to meet with each other often and share ideas and experience. This is a reflection of a confident organisational culture which encourages the empowerment of its staff

The Gallery demonstrated to the Panel a commitment to professional development at all levels and that the Gallery has set itself challenging targets for workforce diversity.

- 2.8 The National Portrait Gallery has managed successfully to balance its historical collection and public remit (including within a number of notable recent acquisitions) with a programme of contemporary art. The Gallery has managed to keep its collection up to date and relevant, utilising its regular competitions (such as the BP Portrait Award), commissioning and acquisition strategy to develop the collection, take managed risks and include work by up and coming artists.

2.9 The Gallery's finances have been well managed. Prudent use of Grant-In-Aid, recent large donations and the longer term commitment of major sponsors such as BP means it is in good shape to weather an economic downturn.

Chapter 3: Areas for Development

The review panel identified some areas for the development that the Gallery should explore further.

Essential

- 3.1. The strategic plan could focus more on where the Gallery wants to be in the future. At this stage the Gallery has not identified what success will look like or what the critical path is to reach success. Some more specific identification of key priorities for the medium to long term will be needed for the Gallery to really make further significant steps forward.
- 3.2. Although the concerns about collection storage and the possibility of moving its conservation studio to the south London site belonging to Tate (the National Art Collections Centre) have been identified as a major issue for the Gallery, higher priority needs to be given to driving forward a solution. There was not a sufficiently clear demonstration of the problem and the opportunity, what the benefits and costs will be or what other options may be available although an options appraisal had previously been undertaken. A decision on this needs to be made quickly and decisively and the Gallery needs to ensure that they don't miss 'plan B' (moving the storage facility only) which could provide benefits in its own right, just because 'plan A' (moving into a joint collection and conservation centre with Tate) is apparently not currently proceeding in the near future.

Strongly Desirable

- 3.3. There is an opportunity for the Gallery to develop a much more ambitious digital programme than the one currently in place. While the NPG website is very popular (with more than 14 million visits each year, two thirds of which are to the collection) and the small in-house team have done a good job to create a new site due to be launched soon, there is still potential for more to be done. The nature of the Gallery's collection lends itself well to the use of the web and there is a great opportunity for the NPG to position itself as a great public resource and champion of portraiture, being able to offer first-rate advice on research and conservation. There is also the opportunity to extend and further engage the broad user community through the adoption of more innovative web technologies. To do so would probably require considerable extra resource but, given the opportunities it offers, the digital programme should be seen as a priority for the immediate future.
- 3.4. Another area which offers great potential for development is the potential that exists to expand the use of volunteers, although there are existing schemes in the Curatorial, Library and Archive departments. The reviewers felt that the Gallery's management had not fully considered the rich range of opportunities that such a programme could offer through expanding the Gallery's programming and broadening its general community engagement. The panel felt that NPG's subject matter and central location are likely to attract many talented and enthusiastic volunteers. The panel noted the concerns expressed about insufficient space for volunteer staff but felt, none the less, that more could be achieved in this area.

For Consideration

- 3.5. The panel felt that through this particular review process the senior management had not fully utilised the tool of self-assessment and that much more could be done to explore and carefully consider those elements of the Gallery's operations that could be improved. Particular attention might be paid to the results of the latest staff survey and to the way in which the Gallery is taking ownership of its storage problems.

- 3.6. Although the financial position of the Gallery appears to be sound, and the Trustees have allocated special oversight to a 'Finance Trustee', consideration might be given again to the establishment of a Finance sub committee of the Board to look in more detail at the Gallery's finances. This has served other similar organisations well.

Chapter 4: Evaluation of the Self-Assessment

As part of the review process, organisations under review have been asked to complete a self-assessment based against six questions. The panel felt that the completed self-assessment by the National Portrait Gallery gave a good overview of both the overarching issues facing the museum and its achievements. Looking at each question specifically:

4.1 What is the strategic vision of your museum?

Although the Gallery has clearly done a lot of work to develop its corporate and strategic plans, the relationship between the two was not fully explained and greater clarity of how the strategic vision can be achieved through the planned work could be beneficial for the Gallery. In discussion the Gallery explained that the work of finalising its strategic vision is still in progress. The Gallery's leadership showed an understanding of the need to take this further.

From looking at the material provided, the panel had initially been concerned that there was potential for conflict between the two overarching statutory aims of the Gallery – these being to 'to promote through the medium of portraits the appreciation and understanding of the men and women who have made and are making British history and culture' and 'to promote the appreciation and understanding of portraiture in all media'. The evidence presented during the review process demonstrated that the Gallery has handled this possible tension well in contemporary and engaging ways.

An opportunity was identified to position the Gallery as more of a champion of the democratisation of portraiture. However through discussion with the Gallery's leadership, the panel are happy that the Gallery have looked into this issue and are tackling it appropriately. Overall, the review visit and discussion with the Gallery's senior management team confirmed that the Gallery presented an honest reflection of its developing strategic vision which is aspirational in its scope.

4.2 How do you measure success and excellence in meeting it?

The review panel thought that in answering this question, the National Portrait Gallery demonstrated activity beyond the minimum requirements of DCMS to evaluate and better understand their standing amongst visitors, the public and their peers in regards to their public offer and the quality of their research and scholarly work. This level of self inquiry and measurement was confirmed in discussion with the Gallery's management.

The Gallery did not provide a description of what success will look like against its strategic aims and how the level of success will be measured or judged. Doing so could serve the Gallery well in the coming years.

4.3 What has gone well recently? What hasn't?

The Gallery was able to provide an impressive list of successes from the past two years (including increasing visitor numbers and successful fund-raising, and the establishment in 2006 of the 'Portrait Fund') and these successes were backed up by evidence provided during the review. The Gallery might consider framing the context in which these successes move them closer toward their strategic aims.

There were few challenges listed by the Gallery and these were all explained by external factors, such as lack of support for specific projects by the DCMS and the Heritage Lottery Fund. It was felt by the review panel that the Gallery could have done more here to explore what hasn't gone well and the lessons learned from these instances. However it should be

stressed that following the review the panel felt that such a list of challenges would be relatively short.

4.4 What are your particular plans and how will you fulfil them?

The Gallery did not list any specific, time-bound plans for the coming years. However it was highlighted that the Corporate Plan includes more information on specifics for the next 3 years and that the planning system has been revised to make it more responsive to change. The review panel felt that this was in part a reflection of both the pro-active management culture of the Gallery to respond to opportunity and the current stage of the organisation's development. Nevertheless, there does seem to remain the opportunity for the Gallery to link more closely its strategic aims to its shorter term plans.

4.5 What challenges and opportunities do you foresee in undertaking them?

The panel recognised the risk that funding constraints will put pressure on the Gallery's ability to both continue its current work and build towards its longer term strategic aims. The panel investigated the challenges listed during the review and particularly significant among these was the need for the Gallery to take decisive action on its need to improve storage of the collection.

The opportunities listed reflected the culture of the Gallery to make the most of its position and to seize opportunities when they arise.

4.6 Do you have the leadership needed to achieve your goals and are you positioned to be adaptable to change?

The leadership of the Gallery is particularly impressive and the self-assessment showed a clear recognition of the roles played by the Director, the Deputy Directors, the Senior Management Team and the Board of Trustees. The reviewers were impressed by the calibre and confidence of the whole management team. The leadership of the Gallery have also managed to instil a culture of empowerment and self-improvement throughout the organisation.

The panel agreed that the Gallery had succeeded in its aim to be "nimble in its ability to respond to good ideas and in how it innovates"

Chapter 5: Summary Against the McMaster Criteria for Excellence

5.1 Provides a life changing experience.

The collection is world-class and presented in very engaging ways. Close work is done with groups such as the NPG Youth Forum. The link between art and British history offers a unique insight to visitors and crosses boundaries of interest.

5.2 Shows creativity and innovation.

Creativity and innovation is shown through the empowerment and freedom given to the curators, the ingenious use of the buildings' limited space and a progressive learning programme. However the digital programme is not fully utilising new and innovative technologies.

5.3 Is willing to take risks.

The Gallery has shown that it takes managed risks through its commissions, by seizing opportunities for trading and collaboration and through the increased importance given to contemporary art in the last decade. These ventures have led to successes. In other areas the Gallery remains risk averse, for instance by not pursuing an expanded volunteers programme and not taking decisive action so far on its storage issue.

5.4 Has an international reputation.

The high level of research and conservation expertise is well regarded and has led to fruitful international collaboration with major organisations. The Gallery's ability to make or attract high profile exhibitions such as Vanity Fair and Annie Leibovitz demonstrates the Gallery's international reputation.

5.5 Is open to everyone.

The Gallery's leadership are passionate about its public facing work. The Gallery offers something for all audiences, does excellent outreach work with young people, is accessible for people with disabilities and runs an exemplary national programme taking the collection around the country. The Gallery is beginning to push forward in other areas such as outreach work with the elderly and making the collection more accessible digitally.

5.6 Presents both relevant and challenging concepts to the public.

The exhibition programme is popular and well managed. Through prizes and commissions the Gallery is able to keep the offer up to date and has successfully made links between contemporary art and the historic collection. The Gallery is striving to find the balance between popular, fame-based exhibits and more challenging work.

Annex – During the review the panel met with National Portrait Gallery staff from the following positions and operational areas:

- **Director**
- **Chairman of the Board of Trustees**
- **Chief Curator**
- **Head of Resources**
- **Head of Information Technology**
- **Head of Exhibitions and Collections Management**
- **Communications and Development Director**
- **Head of Digital Programmes**
- **Head of Finance and Planning**
- **Head of Archive and Library**
- **Head of Learning and Access**
- **National Programmes Manager**
- **Head of Research Programmes**
- **Head of Personnel**
- **Head of Trading**



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