

# Policy and practice: challenges for interpretation in the heritage sector

**Geoff Harrison** and **Jaane Rowehl** report on the AHI and Tourism seminar Audience, Access and Conservation Plans: Working with the HLF, held February 2006

'Interpretation enriches our lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening understanding of people, places, events and objects from past and present'

(AHI definition of interpretation)

The role of heritage interpretation may be changing. While the AHI definition of interpretation reveals a legacy of creativity and individuality, the reality is perhaps more sobering. Following the Heritage Lottery Fund's (HLF) and the Department of Culture Media and Sport's (DCMS) recognition of heritage as a driver for social inclusion, democratisation and regeneration agendas, the pressure to deliver social, political and economic benefits now impact on many publicly funded interpretation projects.

A recent HLF statement underlines this ambition: 'Our view of heritage is a progressive and democratic one. Heritage is what people value and want to hand on to future generations. We believe that all sections of society are entitled to identify, care for and enjoy heritage.' (HLF 'Our Heritage, Our Future, Your Say' consultation document on the third strategic plan, 2006.)

This theme was explored at a conference, Audience, Access and Conservation Plans: Working with the HLF, held in February and organised by the Tourism Society and the AHI. In emphasising the democratic imperative and the need to find out *what* people value, a number of contributors underlined the importance of consultations. In addition, Karen Brookfield – Deputy Director (Policy and Research) for the HLF – highlighted the increasing significance of audience engagement and development in guiding HLF funding.

These themes are further emphasised by the recent promotion of the 'Public Value' agenda by various heritage-related bodies, as witnessed at the Capturing the Public Value of Heritage conference held in London in January (see also the recent Demos report entitled 'Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy: why culture needs a democratic mandate'). The conference was organised jointly by the HLF, English Heritage and the National Trust and included speeches from both Tessa Jowell MP (Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport) and David Lammy MP (Minister for Culture). The ministers' contributions underlined the fact that 'Public Value' – defined simply as 'what the public value' – is now at the heart of heritage sector policy and funding strategies. Other papers presented at the conference summarised methods for potentially measuring and demonstrating Public Value as well as case studies of good practice in terms of projects and policy implementation. Again, many speakers placed a significant emphasis on consultations. In her keynote speech, Tessa Jowell asserted that:

'A public value world would include a lot more "co-production of services" at the local level. Instead of funding what we think is important, we'd start by asking people what's important to them and then thinking about how to protect it. In terms of heritage, that would mean asking the public which buildings and open spaces they value in their local area, and then allocating funding accordingly.

Am I describing a radical departure from the current way of doing things? Absolutely. But it's the only way to maintain our legitimacy and ensure our priorities are shared by the public.'

(Tessa Jowell MP, speech to the Capturing the Public Value of Heritage conference, London, January 2006, [www.dcms.gov.uk](http://www.dcms.gov.uk))

As one might expect, the conferences highlighted many difficult issues and 'lively' debate followed many presentations. While few argued with the democratic principles inherent in public consultation, the events nevertheless raised a number of practical and philosophical questions for those involved in heritage interpretation.

For those involved with seeking funding for interpretation projects, there is perhaps a paradox in the relationship between audience development and 'Public Value'. On the one hand the HLF requires applicants to show how their project will, when implemented, proactively reach out to those people who would not normally engage with heritage. For interpreters, this means identifying and presenting stories and values that will, eventually, appeal to *new audiences* – those for whom the site currently holds little value. On the other hand, the Public Value agenda appears to emphasise the need to demonstrate existing, established values – values that are already held by a *democratic* majority of 'the public' (cf. the title of the Demos report).

This poses an inherent dilemma for heritage interpretation projects in the future. Should they seek funding by emphasising that it will enhance engagement, broadening the appeal of the site for existing users whilst also attracting new audiences? Or, should they seek funding by focusing on the values already placed on a site by many people ('the public') and thus emphasise that the project has a democratic mandate?

If the latter, could, for example, a small community group managing a historic Christian cemetery in an urban area with a large minority ethnic population secure funding for a development project even if the volume of local support was likely to be very limited due to the religious associations of the site? Would the Public Value imperative count against it, even if the project aimed to be fully inclusive?

This is an interesting time in the development of heritage policy. Nonetheless, to add to the long list of questions to which we have not yet found answers, maybe practitioners will need to consider the following when working in the present policy environment:

- Can minority interests in the heritage sector survive if values held by the (democratic) majority are prioritised?
- What is the role of heritage sector interpreters? Should they seek to create and enhance new, engaging values through interpretation or might they be required to emphasise only values that are already widely held?

- Might we just argue ourselves out of our jobs – what *is* the contribution to heritage interpretation made by interpreters?
- At what point can we say that we have consulted enough groups to reveal what 'the public' thinks?
- How do we *measure* 'Public Value'? – Who are 'the public'? What is 'value'?

We would very much like to hear your views on these questions. If you would like to make any comments please email them to:

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We hope to be able to collate these responses and possibly present them as a paper at the AHI conference in September when more discussion can take place.

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