

Working in partnership is now seen as vital as museums seek to make dwindling public money go further. *Simon Stephens* reports

Take your partners

Cornish Slate Ellipse
by Richard Long at the
Hepworth Wakefield in
2012. The work is part
of Artist Rooms,
a collection acquired
jointly by Tate and the
National Galleries of
Scotland from art dealer
Anthony d'Offay



What could attract more than 100 museum and gallery professionals from all over the country to a venue outside Penrith in the Lake District on a wet March day? The answer is partnerships.

The Power of Partnership conference at the Rheged Centre was organised by the Cumbria Museums Consortium, an Arts Council England (ACE) funded group comprising Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery Trust, Wordsworth Trust and Lake-land Arts Trust. The consortium is just one of many museum and gallery partnerships that have sprung up recently.

Earlier this year the National Museum Directors' Council (NMDC) also held a one day event partnerships event. There were nearly 50 people at this London conference, including representatives from the Museums Association, the University Museums Group and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The aim of the meeting was for partnership

managers from national collections, ACE museum relationship managers, and representatives from Major Partner Museums to identify the challenges that national partnerships face.

Museums have always worked collaboratively but in recent years partnerships seem to have become more important and more formalised. Why is this?

Perhaps some of the change relates to a wider trend for museums to be more collaborative, which is reflected in a closer relationship with audiences. More practically, most museums now accept that partnerships are vital if the sector is to make the most of dwindling public funding.

"We can achieve more collectively than we can as individuals," says Tom Boden, the head of museums at Bath Preservation Trust. "This can be in relation to external profile, such as making museums more visible within the local cultural landscape, or

internal operations, such as sharing expertise to improve interpretation, developing community engagement or undertaking joint visitor research."

Partnership advantages

Boden's trust, which manages four museums, is part of the Bath Museums Partnership, which also includes the Holburne Museum and the American Museum in Britain.

Boden points to a wide range of areas where partnership working is bringing rewards: access to funding streams, shared learning, shared experience, joint marketing, joint education and outreach work, and collecting and sharing data.

ACE has identified resilience as one of its key aims for museums and believes partnership working is among the ways that this can be achieved. Indeed much of its money is designed to help museums to work

Below right: George Clausen's painting of a north London scene, *Spring Morning: Haverstock Hill*, was included in the Greater Manchester Museums Group's *Towards Modernity Chinese tour*

International touring

Developing exhibitions to tour internationally has been dominated by the London national museums but a partnership in north-west England recently managed to get in on the act.

Greater Manchester Museums Group (GMMG) is a partnership of eight museum services in north-west England. One of its activities, led by Bury Art Museum, is the development of an international touring programme using items from its collections.

Towards Modernity: Three Centuries of British Art featured 80 works of art from 17 different

organisations. It toured venues in China in 2012-13 and was seen by more than three million visitors. Museums that contributed artworks received a share of the £150,000 that China paid for the exhibition.

The project has been a big coup for Bury after the controversy in 2006 when the council sold a painting by LS Lowry from the museum's collection. The council was later barred from membership of the Museums Association.

The GMMG is now negotiating new projects in the far east and Russia.

Regional museums

"It has been an answer to our prayers, it was money to do things that we desperately needed help for to move forward, but which was so difficult to present in an attractive way for funders. It has enabled us to develop in strategic ways and reduce expenditure." This is how David Dawson, the director of the Wiltshire Museum in Devizes (below), describes the Wessex Museums Partnership, which also includes



Dorset County Museum in Dorchester and Salisbury Museum.

An Arts Council England Strategic Support Fund grant of £175,000 made the partnership possible. The money has allowed the museums to make a number of unglamorous infrastructure improvements, ranging from asbestos removal to shop design, that would never have been possible without the funding.

"We had a conversation about having similar models of governance and facing similar problems," says Jon Murden, the executive director of Dorset County Museum. "We said it would be really good to sit down and figure out how to do something together rather than having to think of all the answers yourself and were there ways we could work together. So when the strategic funding came on stream, it was something we had been thinking about, but it was there to make it happen."



in partnership, whether that is support for Major Partner Museums, through the Strategic Support Fund or via museum development grants. But overall, arts council funding for museums has fallen from about £44m a year to £40m, so this money needs to be used more effectively.

“At a point where we haven’t got enough resources in the sector, we have got to use it better, we have got to be more strategic, we have got to be more efficient,” said John Orna-Ornstein, the director of museums at ACE, speaking at the Cumbria Museums Consortium conference.

“Partnerships often make you more efficient and they give you better reach, whether that’s to audiences or access to funding,” Orna-Ornstein says.

But partnership working can be difficult and time-consuming, despite its many benefits. The NMDC and the Cumbria Museums Consortium conferences both iden-

tified some of the challenges of museums working in partnership.

These included cuts in public funding and an associated lack of resources to manage partnerships, and the complexities of large and small organisations working effectively together.

The Cornwall Museums Partnership is an example of one of the new groups that has been formed in recent years. It was created in 2012 and carries out lots of useful work in a challenging context. It aims to implement the priorities of the Cornwall Museums Strategy, 2012-17, and to drive up standards at the six partner museums and other museums in Cornwall. There are 70 museums in Cornwall, 30 of which are accredited, and they are spread over a huge geographic area. The accredited museums attracted 1.1 million visitors in 2012-13.

“The principle challenge of the partnership at the moment is lack of capacity,”

says Emmie Kell, the Cornwall Museum Partnership project manager. To address this, the plan is to invest more resources in shared partnership staff and contractors to increase the level of partnership activity when required.

Touring exhibitions

“We are not seeking to create a new organisation that then needs to raise funds to support itself – we want to keep our programme responsive, flexible and bureaucracy-lite,” Kell says. “But we have recognised that we do need some additional time allocated to key functions – like financial management and advocacy – if we are to deliver our ambitions to extend the range and type of partnership activity.

“The benefits of partnerships outweigh the drawbacks and I think there is really no other option for our museums,” Kell adds.

Many museum and gallery partnerships ▶

Right: a live interpretation training event organised by Share Museums East, which is based at the Norwich Castle Study Centre



‘We have got to be more strategic’
John Orna-Ornstein,
Arts Council England

Sharing support and expertise

Share Museums East has long been admired for its work helping museums to develop their skills across a range of areas, including collections management, audience development, leadership, learning and economic sustainability.

The programme is delivered by a five-strong team based at the Norwich Castle Study Centre. This work is backed by a £1.14m grant given to Norfolk Museums and

Archaeology Service, which was one of nine organisations in the country to be granted museum development funding by Arts Council England in January 2012.

Share Museums East’s aim is to support excellence, resilience and cooperative working in museums in the East of England. Its work is supported by resources, skills and venues provided for free by museums across the region.

have centred on loaning objects and artworks and this is still often the case. Examples include the Masterpiece tour, where three National Gallery paintings are travelling around the UK, one a year between 2014 and 2016. This began with Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian*, which has so far been to the Beany House of Art and Knowledge in Canterbury and the Bowes Museum in County Durham.

There are also partnerships where whole exhibitions go on tour, such as *Roman Empire: Power and People*, which brings together more than 160 pieces from the British Museum. This started at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery and is now at the Herbert Museum and Art Gallery in Coventry until 31 August. After this it will move to museums in Leeds and Dundee.

One of the UK's most ambitious partnerships is Artist Rooms, which followed the acquisition in 2008 of modern and con-

temporary works owned of art dealer and collector Anthony d'Offay. The collection, which now features about 1,500 works, is jointly owned and managed by the National Galleries of Scotland and Tate. The tour is a partnership with ACE, the Art Fund and Creative Scotland.

Artist Rooms in North Uist

"There have been 29 million visitors in first five years and that is really powerful," says Caroline Collier, the director of Tate National. "It's also very powerful for the artists involved and they enjoy the sense of locality." Collier points to a display of the work of Vija Celmins at Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Arts Centre (until 28 June), saying the American artist was enchanted by the responses to her work from the people living on North Uist, one of the islands in the Hebrides.

But Collier is aware that the relationship

between very large cultural organisations such as Tate and smaller galleries and museums has drawbacks as well as strengths.

"Sometimes it is useful to use the Tate's charisma and weight and sometimes it is better to go more quietly – we do not always need to lead," Collier says.

There has been a lot of controversy recently about arts funding being skewed in favour of London and its large cultural institutions. This follows *Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital*, a report that highlighted a significant imbalance in arts funding between London and the regions.

"I don't think we should make any bones about saying that the £40m investment from government into regional museums is dwarfed by the money [£347m in grant-in-aid in 2012-13] that goes into national museums from central government," said Orna Ornstein at the conference in Cumbria. "I think that's OK in lots of ways, and I'm not



Left: Additional, a series of sculptural installations by artist Céline Condorelli. She is involved in the How To Work Together programme organised by three not-for-profit London galleries



'There is an opportunity for regional museums to be more demanding'
Gordon Watson, Lakeland Arts Trust

Contemporary art commissioning

How To Work Together is a shared programme of contemporary art commissioning and research devised by three non-profit contemporary art galleries in London: Chisenhale Gallery, the Showroom and Studio Voltaire.

The initiative will present nine new artist commissions over the next three years across the three galleries.

The artists who have been commissioned in the first year are Céline Condorelli at Chisenhale Gallery (2 May–22 June), Gerry Bibby at the Showroom (30 April–21 June) and Ella Kruglyanskaya at Studio

Voltaire (11 April–7 June).

Polly Staples, the director of the Chisenhale Gallery, says there are a number of challenges in partnership working, including making sure everyone consistently pulls together and does their share, taking decisions by committee, and accommodating difference productively.

How To Work Together is supported by a grant of £210,000 over three years from Catalyst, a £100m scheme aimed at helping cultural organisations diversify their income streams and access more funding from private sources.

asking for less money for national museums at all, but what I am asking for is more and more sharing, more and more cooperation and the idea that the fantastic collections and expertise can be shared right across the country.”

Funding imbalances aside, regional museums are looking to develop new relationships with nationals.

“It has seemed like nationals have called the shots in terms of looking to who they want to work with,” said Gordon Watson, the director of Lakeland Arts Trust.

“I think there is a real opportunity for museums in the regions to perhaps be more demanding but also to begin to set the agenda in terms of what we would like to see happening,” he says.

Things are changing on both sides and most national museums now have partnerships managers, which was not the case a few years ago.

So is it possible to say what makes a good museum partnership?

“Do your research and plan carefully,” says Kell from Cornwall. “We have looked at lots of different partnership models around the country within and outside the cultural sector and these have helped to form our approach – alongside a very clear understanding of the distinctive needs of our organisations and the context in which we are working.”

Clarity is vital

Polly Staple is the director of the Chisenhale Gallery, which is part of a shared programme of contemporary art commissioning and research carried out with two other London galleries, the Showroom and Studio Voltaire (see p24).

“Be very clear about what your objective is and only do it if it brings benefits that you could not achieve working alone,”

Staple says. “This focus on the shared benefit and ethos will make the partnership work. If you don’t have that clarity and trust the partnership probably will not work.”

Collier at Tate also says that having a clarity of purpose is vital. She also points to the importance of openness, transparency, honesty and trust.

Whatever the future holds for partnerships, it is clear that it is a way of working that is here to stay.

“If our primary purpose is serving the public not serving our institutions, we have got to start thinking in different ways about our museums and our collections and how they work together,” Orna-Ornstein says. “That is a really big challenge.”

There are sessions on partnership work at this year’s Museums Association conference in Cardiff, 9-10 October.
www.museumsassociation.org/conference

Joint acquisition

John Constable’s *Cathedral from the Meadows* was acquired in May 2013 by a partnership of five museums: Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales; the National Galleries of Scotland; Colchester and Ipswich Museums; Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum; and Tate Britain.

The painting has been sent on a five-year tour across the UK starting at the National Museum Cardiff. The tour is a partnership between the five museums that bought the work.

Caroline Collier, Tate National director, said that the partnership follows earlier initiatives such as the Great British Art Debate, a project between Tate Britain, Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums, Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service and Museums Sheffield.

“With the Great British Art Debate we looked at and talked about the value of sharing collections between organisations as one distributed national collection looked after in

different places, but owned entirely by us, the public,” Collier says. “The partnerships have evolved and become more collaborative in nature.”

Cathedral from the Meadows was bought for £23.1m, with grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the Art Fund, as well as contributions from the Manton Foundation and Tate Members. The HLF and the Art Fund are also supporting the tour, which is being accompanied by a series of events and learning activities.

Right: John Constable’s *Cathedral from the Meadows* is to be exhibited at each of the five museums that jointly bought the painting in 2013

