



Association of
Independent
Museums

AIM Guides for Boards

Successful away days for boards of museums and heritage organisations



The AIM
Hallmarks
of Prospering Museums

This guide is designed to offer museums and heritage organisations everything needed to plan a successful Away Day.

Everything in the guide is relevant to any museum, whatever their size or status. If something is likely to be not as affordable for say, a small voluntary-run museum rather than a larger one with paid staff, then whenever possible, alternative solutions are offered.

Throughout, “staff” or “staffing” are used to denote paid staff, volunteers or a combination of both.

Written for AIM by Hilary McGowan

About the author

Hilary McGowan works with museums & heritage organisations to help them to stand on their own two feet, be stronger and survive into the future. She has a background as a museum director and aims to leave clients feeling positive and resilient.

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Introduction

Why have an Away Day?

An Away Day offers an opportunity to work on major topics of strategic importance for an organisation with the freedom of not being tied to a specific meeting agenda. A mix of normal Board business with more complex longer-term planning is a difficult one for a standard Board meeting. However, with a dedicated Day, you can create the focus and sense of purpose needed to concentrate on major, longer term topics.

Most Away Days look at some aspect of strategic planning. The format of the day means that you can consider bigger topics and make decisions more easily than at a normal meeting without being distracted by the usual meeting pressures.

Museums could find an Away Day useful to consider:

- preparing for Accreditation
- staffing or volunteers: changing a staffing structure, employing additional or fewer staff
- moving premises or buying a new building
- medium or longer term financial planning
- preparing a new business plan or forward plan
- considering a major grant application, such as to the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Who should attend an Away Day?

It is important that all Trustees attend the whole of the Away Day. As you will be discussing, and making decisions about, major and significant topics affecting the museum's future development, it is essential that everyone should be present.

If you have paid staff, then senior staff should also attend: definitely the Museum Director/ Curator/Chief Executive (or whatever the most senior member of staff is called) and, usually, other senior managers so that all aspects of the museum would be represented.

If you do not have paid staff, then the volunteers who manage particular aspects of the museum's operation should attend.



Practical considerations

Dates & timing

The date of the Away Day should ideally be agreed when you set your Board meeting dates, so everyone has sufficient warning to ensure their attendance.

It can be at any time of day convenient for the attendees, not necessarily at the same time as your Board meetings. But it should be for most or all of the day, ideally from 9.30 a.m. or 10 a.m. to mid-late afternoon.



Hints & Tips

A successful way of ensuring everyone is present for the start in the morning is to stay overnight at or near to your venue. This allows all the Trustees to have dinner together the night before. Many of the boards of Trustees I have worked with have told me that having a social gathering helped a great deal. The conversation can be more relaxed and wide ranging over dinner than it would be at a Board meeting.

The Room

You should select a room for your Away Day as one in which you would be comfortable spending all day. It should have natural light and ideally have more space than you actually need so you can move around throughout the day – see section 4 On the Day. You can use a more informal layout to underline the fact that it is not a normal Board meeting.

It helps to have tables to sit at, so everyone can write easily but it is ideal if the furniture can be re-arranged as you go through the day. As you are likely to be working in smaller groups some of the time, moving chairs or changing rooms is helpful to refresh everyone.

It is most important however for you to have a comfortable environment where you can control heating or cooling and, if the weather is fair, potentially have access to a garden or short walks. Being in control of the temperature of your room is essential.

Venue/location

As the name suggests, the Away Day should be away from the museum's site. It can be anywhere convenient, which is relatively easy for all participants to get to and has a suitable room and refreshments available.

Holding the event at another museum could provide a useful starting point for discussions, especially if the host has recently completed a new development or undertaken a piece of work relevant to what you are going to consider on your Away Day. A speaker from that museum could open your Day with some reflections on their experience to stimulate your thinking. You could arrange a tour of part or all of the museum and, if you do this, ensure there is time for reflection in the afternoon before you leave so that you can capture what you have learnt from the visit.

A hotel or conference centre could also provide a suitable venue and many period buildings also have conference facilities which could give a more historical background to the Day. If you work closely with another organisation, they may have appropriate spaces to offer.

The cost of a venue may be significant for you. If you work closely with another museum nearby, then they may be more likely to offer you meeting space without cost if you are paying for food and drink from them and if you can offer them a reciprocal arrangement for their own Day in return. But remember every museum needs to maximise its income so don't be unreasonable in your expectations.

Refreshments

You should arrange regular breaks for drinks and have a proper change of environment at lunch time. Ensure that everyone is comfortable and have easy access to drinks for all throughout the Day.

Planning the content and structure of the day

The role of a Facilitator

Ideally you do need an independent external facilitator who will usually charge you a fee.

An external facilitator will:

- chair your day
- advise you on the content of the Day – can you achieve all you want to in one day?
- ensure you achieve what you set out to achieve
- keep you to time and to the topic in hand
- help you to make the decisions you need to make
- keep you at a strategic level and stop you falling into operational details
- ensure everyone gets a voice and larger personalities do not dominate the Day
- may be able to offer examples of best practice in particular areas.

An external facilitator will not:

- express their own opinions unless asked to do so
- contribute to the discussions unless invited to do so
- seek to influence your decisions.

Options for funding a facilitator

HLF, the national funding bodies in each home country, museum development services and some Federations all have funding for supporting strategic planning. It may be possible to apply for support for the costs of an Away Day, including a facilitator.

Briefing an external facilitator

A facilitator will need to know:

- where you want to get to at the end of the Day
- and where you will be starting from, i.e. where you are now and what problems you want to focus on
- previous Board agendas and minutes, including any Away Day details
- who your Trustees are and how long they have served
- a copy of your Forward Plan and recent accounts (the latter especially if there is a financial focus to the Day)
- copies of marketing information such as leaflets, family activities and educational programme information
- simple visitor data and trends in visitor numbers over the past 3 years

If your facilitator is new to your organisation, then you should brief them face-to-face in addition to sending them background documents such as those listed above and providing a staff structure if members of staff will be attending.





Options for alternatives to an external facilitator

If you are not able to afford an external facilitator, it is very important that someone fulfils this role for you; the Day cannot be effectively managed by someone who needs to take part in its content.

Someone acting in the role of a facilitator must be responsible for the programme, ensuring it both runs to time and you achieve what you set out to achieve. An external person who knows the museum is ideal, perhaps someone who is familiar with this type of day from their work. It should always be someone on whom you can rely to be discreet about the content of the Day afterwards and someone who would not seek to impose their own opinions upon you. If, however, you cannot find someone suitable to fulfil this role, then a Chairman or Vice-chairman or a curator/director could do so but you all must be clear that it will inhibit their contributions to the Day.

Hints & Tips

A museum client of mine has previously used someone whom they had worked with, but not as a trustee, to facilitate an Away Day. He knew the museum well as he had chaired the Board's working group which had written an application to HLF. He is retired from being a senior manager in the NHS so had experience of Away Days.



On the Day: content

The AIM Hallmarks

The AIM Hallmarks capture the range of factors that help museums to prosper. They share the experiences of two generations of leaders of independent museums and heritage organisations. Since they were first published in 2015, AIM has worked with museums across the UK to put the Hallmark ideas into practice. Preparing to Prosper, available on

the AIM website, shares ideas and experiences from museums that have used the AIM Hallmarks. Preparing to Prosper includes a series of questions designed to prompt discussions about organisations' strengths and areas for development. These are ideal to use to shape a discussion at an Away Day.

The programme for the day

Whoever is in the role of facilitator needs to set the scene at the beginning of the day: confirm fire alarm procedures, what time lunch is, arrangements for breaks and any other practical matters.

A **warm up exercise** is useful then to get everyone into gear. Ideas for this include every participant writing down three words which summarise something relevant to the Day, e.g. what they want to get out of the Day and how they want to feel at the close, how they would describe their museum now or how they would like it to be in the future, or similar. This is a personal, confidential activity; afterwards they should fold the piece of paper away and keep it until later in the afternoon when they should return to it.

A **summary** of what you will be covering, where you want to get to or similar is then useful. The Day should always be focused on what the Board needs to achieve strategically so the activities must always have these ambitions in mind. A mix of types of activity is ideal to keep participants refreshed, so use a selection from:

- discussions in the whole group
- exercises in smaller groups with a particular focus
- blue sky thinking and
- practical, operationally-sensible problem solving

Summaries of the work in smaller groups should be presented to all participants and notes provided by the facilitator. Decisions, or potential decisions, should be recorded on a flip chart so you can return to them later in the Day.

Open questioning techniques should be used throughout the Day. Preparing to Prosper has example open questions relating to the AIM Hallmarks which you could use or adapt. Open questions are those which cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no' and might begin:

- What is good about...?
- How can we...?
- To what extent does the museum...?
- Why do we think people...?

These questions are used in professional coaching of all kinds, and are a proven technique. They are called open as they do not anticipate a specific answer but allow a wide range of answers, prompting the respondent to think more deeply about their reply.

The facilitator should constantly use these type of questions to challenge assumptions and stimulate clear thinking. If you do not have an external facilitator then whoever is running the Day can use these to encourage reflection and inspire wide ranging debates. If they have limited experience, then these questions are a very useful tool for them.

The most powerful open question is "why?" This is a strong prompt to use with Trustees as the museum sector takes for granted that we have a valuable job to do and are important. Asking "why?" moves the focus from an internal one – too often the main focus on an Away Day – to an external one – to the user, visitor or potential visitor. It is our audience who really matter, not ourselves.

Hot Seat technique

Identifying problems which the museum faces and identifying solutions can be a helpful topic for an Away Day. This can generate a useful exercise to carry out in trios.

The principles of the Hot Seat technique are useful here and are straightforward to introduce on the Day. These are:

- question the person in the Hot Seat who has a problem to solve
- only ask open questions
- don't offer any of your own solutions until the ideas of the Hot Seater are exhausted
- ensure someone is keeping time and recording the ideas of all
- swap round so that everyone gets an opportunity to be in the Hot Seat but also to be the questioner and the time keeper/scribe.

An external facilitator will be familiar with these techniques, which are used in Action Learning.

For more on productive approaches to meetings, see the AIM Guide for Boards on Effective Meetings.

Inviting a guest speaker

While much of the day will be taken up with discussion between participants, you can also invite guest speakers to address you to set the scene for whatever you will be discussing. They could talk about trends in visitor patterns or what your competitors may be planning, economic or generational trends and marketing. Speakers can stimulate your thinking and paint a picture bigger than you yourselves may be able to see.

Post lunch session

If you have a facilitator then they will have ideas about how to ensure participants don't have a post-lunch dip in energy. If you are facilitating it yourself, consider doing things like:

- ensure everyone sits in a different chair after lunch;
- set them a task to undertake where they could take a short walk outside while they discuss a topic;
- if the weather is poor, then get them to stand up while they undertake the next exercise or piece of work (the Hot Seat exercise is suitable for here);
- or after about 30 minutes, get them all to stand up, stretch their arms above their heads, wave their hands about vigorously and shout "yippee!" or similar; this will wake everyone up and probably make them all giggle, as doing something seemingly daft is a good way to create team spirit.



Hints & Tips

GSD: Get Stuff Done

I use Daniel Priestley's GSD list (left) at the beginning of each workshop. Standing for Get Stuff Done, this list should contain everything which may distract you during the course of the Day: things you need to do when you get home, what you would be doing if you were at work or anything else that pops into your head during the Day, and which you don't want to forget.

For example, the Roald Dahl Museum & Story Centre knew they needed a governance review but also had to produce a Forward Plan for their Accreditation. I facilitated their Away Day to begin work on the Plan but we agreed that governance topics, such as new Trustees, should not distract them from this important piece of work.

I took a small GSD box with me labelled "Governance" and into we put pieces of paper with notes on any governance matter which needed addressing later. This stopped distracting us from the matter in hand and also gave me the agenda for the governance Away Day which I facilitated some months later.

¹ Daniel Priestley, entrepreneur author of the Key Person of Influence programme and best-selling business book www.keypersonofinfluence.com

Museum name:

Date:

GSD LIST

(get stuff done list)

Use this list to empty your head of anything which may distract you. Those things you'd be doing if you were at work, things you need to do when you get back or when you get home. Keep it to hand so if anything else pops into your consciousness during the course of the meeting, write it down and concentrate on the discussions in hand.

Action item	When?

with thanks to Dan Priestley

The end of the Day

Near to the end of the day, all participants should do the three word exercise again without looking at their previous pieces of paper. Then they should compare the two versions and share any insights they may have as a result, initially in pairs and then with the wider group. Have they changed their minds about their opinions or ambitions for example?

This can stimulate the discussions which lead into the Action Plan which should complete your Day. This last session should focus on putting their decisions into action over the coming weeks. By this stage, many people will be tired and losing concentration. But it is a crucial step in transforming the Away Day decisions into action and you need to make sure participants are really committed to the plan. So allocate a responsibility to each action with a timescale for each one.

If you can hang a piece of flip chart paper on the wall for the whole day, you can record decisions which may need ratifying at the next Board meeting, or topics which still need exploring further. These can be incorporated into the Action Plan as appropriate.

And with that, you can draw the Day to a close with thanks to all participants for their work.

Notes from the day

You will use flip chart paper, white boards and other such to record your discussions and conclusions. The notes need writing up promptly and usually, if you have an external facilitator, then they should be commissioned to do this. Once the Chairman/Museum Director have agreed the notes, then they should be circulated to all attendees.

Some notes on behaviour

You should encourage professional standards of behaviour on the Day as much as possible, e.g. listening to what others say, not talking over them or interrupting them.

Mobile phones are perhaps less of an intrusion now than they used to be but they can distract you from the matters in hand so you should consider asking everyone to turn them off, or at least to silent (and that includes buzzing and vibrating). In advance of the Day, everyone should be given a contact phone number of the venue so if there is a genuine emergency, such a relative being taken ill, then any participant can be reached with a message quickly.

The 'Contract' for the day

It is vital to get everyone to agree a contract for the Day including principles of being open and honest with each other and, more importantly, not to complain or to talk about disagreements outside the confidentiality of the Day.

A facilitator who is not very experienced may balk at this; but it is crucial, however well the Trustees work together or know each other. The Day may highlight how some Trustees think differently about important topics. Encouraging open and honest debate is one of the key characteristics of a good and productive Away Day.

It is important, as the facilitator asks if everyone agrees to this contract, that the facilitator should make eye contact with each individual who should nod or speak their agreement; anyone who does not do so needs challenging. Given the importance of this agreement, if you do not have an external facilitator then the Chairman can lead this to ensure it happens and is respected. It is an important cornerstone of the Day.



Hints & Tips

Agreement about the Contract is something which needs handling delicately and many people feel a bit uncomfortable at this point. I often lighten the seriousness of this contract by saying that they must all agree not to gang up on anyone at play time. This dissipates the tension of the moment and makes people smile without detracting from the importance of the contract agreement.

When should you meet again?

Every Board of Trustees should have one Away Day per year but you can have two or three, depending on what is current for you. If you have several big topics to consider then having two per year may be very helpful, could ensure that your standard Board meetings are more productive and not clogged up by an unhelpful mixture of monitoring the finances and trying to look into the future.

But beware of overloading Trustees: good Trustees will have busy lives, maybe serving on other charity boards and probably running businesses, organisations and families. Too many meetings, as these Days will be in addition to standard Board meetings, could stretch them too far. Ideally schedule the Away Day alongside your standard Board meetings at the beginning of your year so you do not struggle to agree a date when everyone can attend.

Resources

Meeting Together, Lois Graessle & George Gawlinski, 2008

Start with Why?, Simon Sinek, 2009

Preparing to Prosper: using the AIM Hallmarks to review and strengthen your museum or heritage organisation, Association of Independent Museums, 2017

Effective Meetings, Anne Murch & Gaby Porter, AIM Guide for Boards, 2018

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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

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