AIM Hallmarks of Prospering Museums
Some work that shaped our thinking

The [AIM Hallmarks of Prospering Museums](#) distil the practical insights of the people who lead the UK's most successful independent museums. The ideas which underpin Hallmarks are primarily shaped by the day-to-day experience of running prospering museums; but they also draw on contemporary thinking about sustainability and resilience, both in museums and in the broader cultural sector. This paper outlines some of the key sources we found helpful in developing Hallmarks and which you might find useful reading to help you think about how your organisation can prosper.

1. Mark Robinson's work on Adaptive Resilience

Mark Robinson explores the idea of 'adaptive resilience' in two useful papers. Drawing on theories used in ecology, adaptive resilience is a way of encapsulating the idea that change is a good thing, and that staying strong does not mean staying stable:

> Adaptive resilience is the capacity to remain productive and true to core purpose and identity whilst absorbing disturbance and adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances. (Mark Robinson, *Making Adaptive Resilience Real*, Arts Council England: July 2010, page 14. Link: http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/making_adaptive_resilience_real.pdf)

Mark stresses the need for 'a **culture of shared purpose and values** rooted in a strong organisational memory, avoiding missiondrift but consciously evolving' (*Making Adaptive Resilience Real,* p.6), an insight that we found useful in developing our thinking around purpose in the AIM Hallmarks.

In a second paper (link: http://culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Diversity_and_adaptive_resilience_public-1.pdf), co-authored with Tony Nwachukwu, Mark Robinson explores the links between adaptive resilience and diversity: the more diverse an organisation is, the greater its capacity to adapt and thrive.

2. Heritage Organisations and Resilience

In 2012, BOP Consulting were commissioned by English Heritage and Heritage Lottery Fund to identify the characteristics of resilient heritage organisations.

Their report (link: http://hc.historicengland.org.uk/content/pub/2012/bop-heritage-organisations-resilience.pdf) was based on a literature review, and 15 detailed organisational case studies, (link: http://hc.historicengland.org.uk/content/pub/2012/bop-case-studies-resilience.pdf), both now available on the Historic England website.

The report's approach is based on the understanding that resilient behaviour for an organisation is seen in 'interesting and positive responses to challenging times' (report, p.1), although the report authors stress that what constitutes resilient behaviour is specific to organisational context, and changes for individual organisations over time.

The report emphasises that resilient behaviours have to serve an organisation's core purpose, so that identifying that purpose is an essential first step in becoming more resilient. Based on their literature review, the authors suggested that six characteristics constitute organisational resilience. Recognising that all six referred to skills, attitudes or behaviours, rather than structures of models, was an important insight shaping the AIM Hallmarks:

- Flexibility and speed of response in dealing with challenges
- Diversity (in everything from income streams to management skill-sets)
- Willingness to embrace small-scale change and experimentation
- Awareness and anticipation of trends or challenges facing the sector
- Sound financial planning skills
- Willingness to tackle more than one constraint at a time *(report, p.5)*

The authors then explored these characteristics with the organisations in their case studies and, based on combining insight from the literature review and the case studies suggested five characteristics of resilient organisations, which we considered carefully in developing the AIM Hallmarks:

1. Combines stewardship with business acumen
- Has a strong understanding of how the organisation functions as a business, backed up by a formal business planning process
- Balances investment in its heritage assets, with efforts to understand its customer and supporter base, and to develop new products and offers that unlock income and support
- Reviews its legal status and considers the merits of alternative models (e.g. trust status, shared services, trading arm, outsourcing)

2. Applies its business acumen to exploit its assets commercially
- Identifies its unique selling points that make it stand out from purely commercial competitors
- Seeks to attract diverse income sources to avoid dependence on any one source (where possible, avoiding public sector dependence)
- Shares services and ventures with partners where this makes for more efficient delivery
- Measures the true cost of income generation
- Assesses risks and seeks to minimise them, where possible testing new products and services at a small scale before scaling up

3. Makes time for communication
- Identifies and draws on staff members' passions and their full range of interests and skills, connecting staff across departments
- Supports staff but is realistic about when change is needed, and is not afraid of change
- Has a management style that is approachable and transparent, welcoming debate with staff and sharing performance information

4. Is visible and connected
- Is championed by its Director and Board – they are advocates for the organisation in other public forums
- Is networked beyond its immediate local area and the heritage sector (and considers recruiting from other sectors)
- Horizon scans for changes in its operating environment and for new opportunities that fit its vision and help deliver its business plan

5. Maximises the value of its volunteers and supporters
- Invests in coordination, training and support for volunteers, and for the staff members who work with volunteers
- Analyses its volunteer and supporter base to identify what motivates and rewards them, using this knowledge to tailor opportunities
- Audits Board skills, regularly reviewing the Board and recruiting to fill any gaps
  (Report p.13-14)

3. Insights from the 2011 conference, *We're Not in Kansas Anymore: adapting to survive.*

When AIM was developing the Hallmarks, we found the notes (link: http://culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/AE_Adapting-to-survive-_-designing-for-resilience.pdf) on this conference very helpful. Organised by All About Audiences (now The Audience Agency), it took place in the context of funding cuts and considered adaptation and resilience. Participants stressed that resilience requires both a focus on the future, and a heightened sensitivity to organisational context; 'ear to the ground, and eye to the future' (*report, p.3*).

Other messages from this conference which helped to inform the development of the AIM Hallmarks included:

- The need for organisations to be clear about their purpose or mission and to stay true to core values, whatever the changes they are faced with

- The crucial importance of audiences, and the need for greater involvement of audiences as times get tough

- The need to be 'masters of our own destiny' (report, p.3), something that really chimes for AIM with the idea of being 'independent-spirited'.

4. Morris Hargreaves McIntyre: 7 pillars of audience focus

Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, the cultural sector consultancy has identified '7 pillars of audience focus' which it uses in its work with arts organisations to help them think about how effectively they are engaging with audiences. The pillars are discussed in an interesting report (link: http://mhminsight.com/articles/insight-required-5081), which also notes that, whereas fifteen years ago, museums and galleries had been slow to think about audiences in the same way as other parts of the cultural sector, now 'the performing arts are lagging way behind museums and galleries in terms of being audience-focused, insight–guided and outcome-orientated' (*report, p7*).

MHM identifies that successful arts organisations are:
- Vision-led
- Brand-driven
- Inter-disciplinary
- Outcome-oriented
- Insight-guided
- Interactively-engaged
- Personalised

MHM's report offers questions that museums and other cultural sector organisations can use to consider how effective their practice is, under each of these headings. (For example, under 'interactively engaged', questions include: 'do audiences have an input into your services and have you got good ideas from them?' And, 'Do you have real, ongoing dialogue, or just occasional input?' *(Report, p.6).* Museums interested in exploring how their practice measures

up against the AIM Hallmarks including Innovation and Risk, Visitor Focus, and Awareness and Networks will find these questions a useful prompt.

5. Nick Poole, *Resilience and Museums,* Blog for the Collections Trust, September 2014, based on a presentation for London Museums Group

In an engaging blog (link: http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/blog/item/13687-resilience), Nick Poole considered the characteristics of companies that were resilient in the most basic sense that they had been around for a long time.

Nick noted that most of these organisations displayed some or all of the following characteristics:

- Value - they produce something people need and want
- Prudence - they don't grow faster than the market demands
- Symbiosis – they exist in a balanced relationship with their community
- Geography – their activity is optimised to their location
- Pride – they take pride in their longevity
- Heritage – they have a sense of cumulative investment & value

Nick suggested that while the most significant of these was value, it was perhaps harder for museums to define simply what need they were meeting and that being able to do so would help museums become more resilient.

In his blog, Nick also considered the characteristics of resilient living creatures, suggesting that such creatures displayed:

- Toughness - they are over-engineered to optimise survival
- Diversity – they actively avoid homogeneity to maximise adaptability
- Pro-activity – they proactively propagate to survive
- Adaptability – they are in a constant process of adaptation
- Dormancy – they can survive drought by reducing activity

All of these characteristics have interesting resonance for museums. Drawing on these insights, Nick Poole suggested that resilient museums would be *optimised*, *networked* and *adaptable*. Some of the key aspects of his definition support the AIM Hallmarks particularly that the Resilient Museum is:

Optimised:

- Clear about its purpose
- Has good governance

Networked

- Engaged with its audience
- Connected to professional networks and other partners

Adaptable

- Has a positive working culture

7. Research to understand the resilience, and challenges to this, of Local Authority museums

Produced since the publication of the AIM Hallmarks, the TBR consulting report for Arts Council England (link: http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/ACE_ResilienceLAMuseums_FinalReport.pdf) on the resilience of local authority museums offers important insight for all museums. It references the AIM Hallmarks and one of its key conclusions is that organisational culture is more important than organisational structure in determining the resilience of a museum, an important caveat for museums thinking about moving from local authority control.

8. Other resources

- Culture Hive has a small but useful set of documents on resilience: http://culturehive.co.uk/tags/resilience

- Creative and Cultural Skills offers a toolkit on business survival which includes thinking on resilience: http://business-survival-toolkit.co.uk

Please let us know if you have helpful resources on resilience you would like us to link to here.

More resources will be added to the AIM website to support museums in taking forward the AIM Hallmarks over the coming months: www.aim-museums.co.uk.

If you have any comments on the AIM Hallmarks or want to know more about the programmes which support them, please contact Helen Wilkinson, AIM Assistant Director: helenw@aim-museums.co.uk