

Starting (or improving) a museum

How do we go about establishing a new museum?

How do we sort out our existing museum to make things more interesting for visitors and easier for us to manage?

1. Make sure the museum has a clear focus so it stands out from other museums – put together a written *Statement of Purpose* to help set the museum's direction.
2. Give some thought to who your museum is aimed at and what it will offer that is different from other museums. Who will visit it, why will they visit and what are their likely interests and needs now and in the future? An understanding of this will help you plan your museum so it can be relevant and well supported. A feasibility study may be very worthwhile, including focus groups with people representing potential visitors and supporters.
3. Establish the museum's key stories and decide (or review) what the museum is going to collect, and what it is not going to collect, in order to develop your *Collection Policy*. This is a museum's key document. It should relate very closely to the Statement of Purpose.
3. Decide which are the really significant objects or collections for the museum.

You'll need to establish:

- Which collection items you should gather more information about, and catalogue, store and display according to museum standards. There may be some collection 'gaps' in terms of the museum's key stories which would be priority collection areas in the Collection Policy.
 - Which collection items have no significance and relevance – these should not be kept. If they have been catalogued there is a formal de-accession procedure required, otherwise any tactful process will do.
 - If any items are better suited to an 'education collection' to be used as props for handling, dressing etc. These may be items with little heritage value, or duplicates of collection items, but they help tell one of the museum's stories. Develop a procedure for managing these separate to the collection records.
5. Make sure the museum really does own its collection, and that people in the future can find out what each object is, what is important about it and where it

is stored or displayed. Start using *Donor Forms* for all donations if you don't already do so. You may need to create a work plan to address any long term loans or objects with no documentation, to end up 'owning' the collection. A *Register* needs to be kept that records every item acquired, and correct cataloguing procedures should be followed, recording as much information about each item as possible when acquired. It is generally better to use a specialist cataloguing program than try and devise one, or standard cataloguing paper based forms can be used and the information can be transferred to the computer at a later date.

6. Talk about how you will present the collection and museum stories and bring your ideas together in an *Interpretation Plan*. This may include the site and buildings if these are relevant. This will cover what kinds of exhibitions, education programs, signage, talks, web content etc. the museum will present.
7. Develop a *Conservation Plan* for the collection (and buildings etc. where relevant), to guide you in caring for collection.
8. To help organise yourselves to work through the processes described above you need to create a *Forward Plan*. Bring together everything you would like to do in the next 3 to 5 years. Include an annual work plan for the upcoming year covering who will do what, when by, and the budget.
9. Gather a good team of people to support the museum. Preserving and interpreting a museum's collections well involves a very wide range of skills and interests, including specialised skills in research, history, education, design, writing, editing, project management, customer service and so on. Involving people with the right skills will help you to create plans that are well-informed, realistic and interesting, and can inform and guide everyone involved in the museum as it develops. Some people might be involved as volunteers, committee or staff members. You'll need to pay others for their time and expertise, and allocate adequate funds or apply for grants to cover your museum's needs.

Help yourselves and get help where you can!

Information resources are available to assist you.

The Museums Australia website includes both resources we have created and links to a wide range of museum resources – the resources listed below are accessible through the Resources section (under Services) www.mavic.asn.au

- Collection Policy Template
- Forward Plan Template
- *Develop a Conservation Plan*
- *Essential References for Victorian Museums* – list of museum 'bibles' see especially *Museum Methods* and *Recollections*
- *Useful Australian Websites for Victorian Museums* – there is a great deal of useful information for museums available on the web, this is an up to date list with notes on what is available at each site.

See also:

- *National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries* – both a useful summary and link to the complete document which includes tips
http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/sector_info_item/107
- *Museum Methods* – Starting a Museum
http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/sector_info_item/11

Funding may be available for employing consultants to work on a Significant Assessment, Interpretation Plan and Preventive Conservation Plan.

A Guide to grants and assistance for heritage conservation in Victoria can be downloaded from the Heritage Victoria website:

<http://www.heritage.vic.gov.au/Funding/Guide-to-Grants-and-Assistance.aspx>

We recommend ringing Heritage Victoria and the National Library to discuss your eligibility for grants that they offer.

Training

We recommend that you join Museums Australia, if you are not a member, www.museumsaustralia.org.au, and find out about training opportunities, seminars, grants, projects, etc. as they come up, through our e-bulletins and magazines.

Heritage Victoria also has a calendar relating to training on their website:

<http://www.heritage.vic.gov.au/Volunteer-community/Calendar/Calendar-View.aspx>.

Visiting and talking to people at museums that are similar to yours in some way is also extremely valuable.

Good luck!