



SSN Consortium Terms of Reference – November 2018

BACKGROUND

Subject Specialist Networks (SSNs) have existed in one form or another for many years in support of developing professional knowledge and sharing good practice within the Museum and Heritage sector and promoting more widely a better understanding of its work..¹ In 2003, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council recognised the importance of SSNs and set up a programme of support and funding. This continued in one form or another with Arts Council England delivering ad hoc discreet funding strands for SSNs.

There are now approximately 40 SSNs in the UK across diverse collection areas, for example the Musical Instruments Resource Network, the Rural Museums Network, and Sporting Heritage.² All SSNs operate as networks for skills sharing, subject specialisms, and sector support. The majority have a UK wide remit. SSNs differ from each other in the ways they operate and the services they provide. However, as a group, SSNs have core aims which unite them: 1) to advocate for specialist collections; 2) to share and exchange information and knowledge about specialist collections; and 3) to encourage and enable excellence in care and access of collections.

The remit of SSNs is not limited to museum activity – the majority work across a multitude of sectors, including archives, libraries, and community organisations, allowing for a rich tapestry of knowledge and interpretation skills sharing. SSN activity extends widely across areas including advocacy, professional development, conservation and wider collections management skills, funding, organisational development, in addition to the important roles of networking and training. Finally, SSNs support activity from grass-roots level upwards, engaging with professionals and volunteers on the ground, and supporting the diversification of collections activity and access.

¹ For example, The Army Museum Ogilby Trust was established in 1953. the Social History Curators Group in 1975, and NatSca 1995.

² Further information about the range of SSNs and contact information can be found at www.subjectspecialist

networks.org.uk

SSNs are about people – those who deliver services and who access and work with collections. As a collective, the SSNs respond to the needs of thousands of professionals and volunteers working across many different sectors. We provide those working with collections a voice and access to the best available specialist support. Our strengths lie in our diversity and ability to work from grassroots upwards through many different mechanisms including advocacy, professional development opportunities, research, and digital access. Ultimately, SSNs strive to ensure that the workforce has the skills and knowledge to deliver their remits, providing better care for collections and increasing access and use of those collections. Although our relationship is with individuals, our impact is at organisational and policy level.

THE NEED TO WORK TOGETHER

To date, there has been no clear policy or strategy in place regarding SSNs and their activity. A key impetus in the creation of an SSN Consortium has been provided now by the manifest need outlined in the 2017 DCMS Mendoza Review³ and its coincidence, not only with more highly restricted funding, but also a perceived lack of strategic leadership and advocacy for the sector.

The Mendoza Review recognised the importance of SSNs and their activity.³ Specifically, the SSNs play a vital role in supporting the increase of collections expertise, professional expertise, and sharing expertise. The Review highlights that SSNs are invaluable in a collections climate which is facing economic restraints, and that SSNs create much-needed opportunities to network and provide professional advice, information, and expertise on a range of subject areas. Nevertheless, whilst the SSNs welcome this understanding of the important part they play, specifically in connection with museum activity, there is still a long way to go in terms of ensuring a better understanding of their wider role.

³To read the full review, please visit <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-mendoza-review-an-independent-review-of-museums-in-england>

PURPOSE OF THE GROUP

The purpose of the group is three-fold:

- **ADVOCACY:** To advocate for the role and centrality of SSNs across all elements of SSN delivery including professional development, collections care and management, grassroots support, and in terms of our impact on wider agenda and policy areas, for example, education, health and wellbeing. We will provide a voice in strategic planning at high level policy and decision making to support those who are working more directly with collections and archives. We will work towards a clear strategy for SSNs and lever in support and funding which secures their long-term future, recognising the indispensable role they play in developing and supporting collections care, management and access.
- **SHARING AND SUPPORT:** This purpose is two-fold. 1) To better understand each other and develop mechanisms for sharing information, objectives, and opportunities for sharing skills. To establish measurable benchmarks for the work of the SSNs and their impact; and 2) To ensure we are supporting all those working and volunteering or wishing to work or volunteer with collections from grassroots upwards through sharing information and expertise. Our purpose is to ensure that specialist advice and guidance is easy to access, relevant, and inclusive.
- **EXPERTISE:** SSNs by their very nature draw together specialists and experts with extensive knowledge and understanding of discreet subject areas. A purpose of the SSN Consortium is to ensure that this expertise is recognised and supported; and that access to expertise is facilitated.

MEMBERSHIP

- Each SSN will have equal membership;
- Membership is open to anyone from the executive committee, or equivalent organising group or management of an SSN in the UK;
- Each SSN should nominate a lead member to attend meetings and feed in to decision making and development planning.

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Where an SSN wishes to be involved, they should nominate a lead contact, ensure, where possible, that the contact regularly attends group meetings or feeds in to the meetings, joining the Jiscmail group online, and participating where practical in working groups;

- All members of working groups will report development work, external advocacy, and discussions back to the regular group meetings.

REVIEW

- The Terms of Reference will be reviewed annually.

WORKING METHODS

- Working groups may be developed from time to time to ensure key areas of work are developed and/or advanced between regular meetings. In this instance, SSN leads will put themselves forward and a group decision will be made regarding the membership and responsibilities of working groups;
- At times we may see fit to invite key decision and policy makers to meetings to share and inform our planning and to receive external advice and guidance. In these instances, the group will be informed through Jiscmail and all representatives will have the right to raise any concerns about external organisation attendance.

MEETINGS

- Meetings will be held three times a year and take the form of a round table (or as the work demands). These will be booked in a year in advance.
- Where possible we will provide remote access joining via IT;
- A call for agenda items will be circulated 3 weeks prior to the next meeting and members will have 10 days to respond;
- An agenda will be circulated 1 week prior to the meeting by the nominated meeting organiser. The next meeting organiser will be agreed at the end of each meeting.
- At the start of each meeting, a nominated member will agree to take notes and circulate minutes within 2 weeks of the meeting;
- Whenever possible, the Consortium will turn to group members to offer meeting spaces;
- At the end of each meeting, we will agree the organising chair of the next meeting.

SHARING OF INFORMATION AND RESOURCES (INCLUDING CONFIDENTIAL MATERIALS)

- Information will be shared through the Jiscmail group;
- A Google Docs folder (or similar) will be set up to share resources, confidential material, and think papers for discussion and input;
- The web space will be maintained with a view to securing funding for a more creative approach.

(November 2018)